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THE RANCH GIRLS SERIES

The Ranch Girls at Rainbow Lodge

BOOKS BY MARGARET VANDERCOOK

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TRAIL**



SHE WAVED HER WONDERFUL PAPER BEFORE HER FRIENDS.

THE RANCH GIRLS SERIES

The Ranch Girls

—AT—

Rainbow Lodge

—BY—

MARGARET VANDERCOOK

ILLUSTRATED BY

HUGH A. BODINE

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The Ranch Girls at Rainbow Lodge.

CHAPTER I.

THE LOST TRAIL.

OVER the brown plain a shaggy broncho trotted slowly, with its head drooping.

A girl stood up in her saddle with one hand to her lips. "Halloo! Halloo!" she cried. "I wonder where on earth I am? I thought I knew every inch of this country, yet here I am lost and I can't be but a few miles from our ranch. I must have missed the trail somewhere. Jim! Jim Colter! If there is anybody near, please answer me."

Jacqueline Ralston rode astride. Her eyes and cheeks were glowing and her gold brown hair, deep grey eyes and brilliant color, formed an unusually attractive picture.

She leaned over and gave her pony a penitent hug. "Poor little Hotspur, you shall have a rest pretty soon, even if I have to spend the night out of doors. But won't Jean and Frieda be frightened? Jim will scour the prairies for me."

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The pony was treading through a vast field of purple clover fading to brown in the autumn sun. It was just before sunset. Away to the right, Jacqueline could see a group of slow moving objects, which she knew to be cattle. Half a mile on the opposite side was a sparse group of evergreen trees and low bushes. But there was nothing else that broke the vision of a long line of level country, until the snow-capped peaks of the distant mountains shone like gold in the rays of the setting sun.

"We will try the trees, Hotspur," Jacqueline urged coaxingly. "Perhaps we may find a trail over there. Anyhow I believe I would rather be a solitary babe in the woods, than to wander around here in the alfalfa fields until to-morrow morning."

The girl wore a short, brown corduroy jacket and skirt, leather leggings and riding boots. Over the pommel of her saddle hung a bunch of silver grouse and a smart little rifle was suspended at her side.

"I am desperately hungry," she announced aloud. "I do wish I had a match so I could light a fire. Jolly good advice that of Jim's for a ranch girl, 'never try to find your match, always carry it with you.'"

Jacqueline laughed. She was not willing to confess that she was tired, although she had been riding since eight o'clock that morning. Against the wishes of her sister Frieda, her cousin Jean, and the overseer of their ranch, Jim Colter, she had gone off alone to inspect the corral which had been recently built to protect their sheep for the winter.

Inside the woods the way was darker and there was no sign of a road. Jacqueline let the reins slacken on her pony's neck. Really Hotspur would have to find the right trail home, if they were to reach the ranch house that night. She could hear the rabbits and squirrels scurrying back into their retreats. They were not accustomed to being disturbed at their supper time and at first there was no other sound.

"Who goes there?" suddenly a rough voice demanded, and a horse came plunging through an opening in the trees.

Jacqueline's color paled. She recognized the rider, a boy of about sixteen, nearly her own age. "I am Jacqueline Ralston," she answered quietly. "I have lost the trail. Will you please show me the way to the Rainbow Ranch?"

The young fellow laughed rudely. "Miss Ralston, is it?" he sneered. "Don't tell me you are lost on our ranch. You have been over here spying at our cattle. Just you trot along home as fast as you can. I shall report to my father what I caught you doing." The boy's light blue eyes blazed angrily.

Jacqueline had reined in her pony and waited. Her temper was not her strong point, but she replied politely: "I am not spying, Dan Norton; I wonder why you should think it necessary. I will leave your ranch as soon as I can get away from it. Will you please show me the trail?"

Jacqueline held her head very high. "Won't you tell me?" she asked again. "Because we happen to be enemies is no reason why you shouldn't believe my word." The young girl's tones were gentle, but her face was white with anger in the gathering dusk. Her firm red lips were pressed tight together to keep her from saying the things she really felt.

Dan Norton rode closer toward her and for reply struck her pony sharply with his short riding whip. Tired little Hotspur quivered

with pain, but stood still under his mistress' gentle words.

"Don't do that again, Dan," Jacqueline protested, feeling the hot blood rush to her face and then leave her cold and still with anger. "There is not another person in Wyoming who would be so rude to me. But there has been trouble enough between you and us. I shall not speak of this, but I shall never be able to forgive you to the longest day I live;" and Jacqueline's grey eyes looked so proudly and so scornfully into the boy's that his own dropped.

"Your way's to the left," he muttered. "If you ride quick, you will soon be on the boundary of your own ranch. Hurry, there is some one else coming this way."

Jacqueline did not stir. A few minutes before, she would have trotted off gladly. Now nothing would have induced her to go. She would not run away from her enemy. Indeed she preferred to explain her presence on his ranch to Mr. Norton.

In the silence between the two young people another voice entered, but it was not Mr. Norton's. Some one was singing.

Dan Norton rode hurriedly out of sight and

Jacqueline lifted her rifle, letting it rest in her arm.

“If a body meet a body,
Comin’ through the rye;
If a body kiss a body,
Need a body cry?
Every lassie has her laddie,
Nane they say have—

“Oh!” the song stopped abruptly. The singer threw up both hands and burst into a merry boyish laugh. “I surrender in the name of—in the name of most anything, if you will only put down that gun,” he declared. “Who would have thought of meeting a girl in these woods? Whatever are you doing here? Poaching? No, I believe you don’t have game preserves in this country, so poaching isn’t against your law.” The stranger laughed, though he had taken off his hat and bowed courteously to his fellow traveler. “Please tell me, are you Rosalind in the forest of Arden? You look like her, although I never heard of her on horseback,” he ended merrily.

Jacqueline bit her lips. The young man was evidently a newcomer in the neighborhood and at any other time Jacqueline would have liked him. He must have been about

seventeen and was tall and slender, with light brown hair and clever brown eyes. His dress was that of a cowboy, but Jacqueline saw with a feeling of instant disdain that his clothes were too new and his face too white for him to have lived long in her country. Besides he did not ride or talk like a Westerner.

"I am Frank Kent, at your service," he explained, puzzled by Jacqueline's haughty silence. "I am an Englishman and I don't quite know what I ought to do or say out in Wyoming. But may I be of any service to you?"

Jacqueline's feeling of hurt and anger began to subside and she smiled in a more friendly fashion. Frank Kent decided that he had never seen such a pretty girl before in his life. Had she been a city girl, her skin would have been fair, but from her outdoor life it had become exquisitely darkened by the wind and sun of the prairies. Her hair was like bronze and her color a deep rose.

"I ought not to be asking favors of you," Jacqueline replied in her usual manner. "You are a stranger in a strange land, while I have lived out West since I was a baby. But can you show me the trail to the Rainbow

Ranch? Anyhow tell me how to get off of this place. I have never been on it before, and—.” To save her life Jacqueline could not keep her voice from trembling.

“Surely I can show you,” Frank answered. He spoke with such a funny English accent, that Jacqueline would have liked to have made fun of him, if she had known him better.

“I have heard a lot about the girls who run Rainbow Ranch,” he went on quickly. “They sound like such an awfully good sort that I have made Dan Norton tell me a lot about them. I am visiting him, surely you must know him,” the young fellow concluded eagerly.

What in the world had he said? Frank Kent was startled. The girl he had just met seemed quite friendly a moment before. Now she stiffened up on her pony, her cheeks turned scarlet and her eyes flashed.

“I won’t trouble you any further,” she announced. “I will find my own way home from here.” Without another word or a backward glance, Jacqueline gave her pony a gentle cut and Hotspur galloped quickly away.

“Whew,” Frank Kent whistled, “methinks some one told me that the people one met out

West were awfully friendly and informal. That girl was as touchy as you find them. But I wonder who she is? I think I will ride after her and show her the trail, even if she is so high and mighty."

Jacqueline pretended not to hear the young man trotting along behind her, and did not turn her head. She rode faster and faster until a sound like a stifled moan arrested her. Jacqueline paused and saw that the young fellow who had been so polite to her a few minutes before was ghastly white. He was swaying so in his saddle that he had not the strength to stop his horse.

Jacqueline caught his bridle. "Rest a minute," she urged gently. "You will soon be all right. You have ridden too far and you are not used to it. People always do too much, when they first come to Wyoming. My name is Jacqueline Ralston and I am one of the girls at the Rainbow Ranch. I am sorry I was rude to you a little while ago, but the Nortons are not our friends." Jacqueline was talking so that the young man could get his breath. She could not help admiring the brave fight he made. He

seemed to be dreadfully ashamed of his own weakness.

"You will let me show you the right trail, won't you?" he asked. "I am sorry you are not friendly with my hosts. I thought I heard you talking to Dan, when I rode up to you, but that won't matter about me, will it? I don't know anything about your quarrel and if we were properly introduced, don't you think we could be friends? I can't tell you how plucky I think it is for you three girls to be managing your own ranch. Don't you think you might tell me a thing or two about it? It is pretty lonely out here for a stranger."

The young fellow looked so nice, and so ill, in spite of his efforts to hide it, that Jacqueline almost relented. Then the thought of Dan Norton's rudeness and the long feud between them swept over her, and Jacqueline shook her head firmly.

"I am sorry," she returned. "With any one else it would not matter, but we can't be friendly with any guest of the Norton's." Jacqueline hesitated, "I can't explain it to you, there isn't time. Good-bye. I know the way home from here."

Frank Kent watched Jacqueline ride out of sight, sitting on her pony as though she had been made on it, like a figure cut from bronze, all in soft tones of gold and brown.

It was quite dark when Jacqueline at last spied the lights of her own ranch house twinkling at her warmly through the open windows and doors.

The broncho hurried faster, forgetting his hard day and Jacqueline talked low in his ear.

"Home and supper, Hotspur! See the lights of home ahead. Soon they will hear us coming. Suppose I give our call and relieve the suspense." Three times in rapid succession, Jacqueline touched her red lips with her slender fingers and gave a shrill, clear whistle like an Indian's call.

Instantly figures moved about in the ranch house. A dark lantern was swung off its place over the front door and a man and two girls hurried down the drive. Jacqueline was lifted off her horse. Her sister, Frieda, seized her by one arm, her cousin, Jean, by the other.

"What has kept you so long?" Frieda demanded anxiously.

"If you have had an adventure and wouldn't

let me go with you to-day, I shall never get over it," Jean insisted. "Come into the house this minute. Do tell us where you have been. Jim telephoned over to the other side of the ranch three hours back, but the sheep herders said you started for home long ago. We have been frightened to death ever since."

Frieda pulled at her sister's jacket. Jean, although she kept up her scolding, got a pair of soft, red felt slippers and placed them invitingly in front of the big, living-room fire.

Rainbow Lodge was built of pine logs. The great sitting-room was forty feet long and two-thirds as wide and it looked like a man's room, but the three ranch girls did not know it. The floor was covered with buffalo robes and beautiful bright Navajo blankets made by the Indians in the nearby villages, and the head of an elk thrusting forth giant antlers dominated the scene from above the stone fireplace. An Andrew Jackson table made of hewn logs, with a smooth polished top, occupied one side of the fireplace, holding a reading lamp and some half-opened books.

In another corner the home-made book shelves were filled with much-read novels and books of travel. There were low, comfortable

chairs about everywhere. It was an odd room to be occupied by three young girls, but a very noble one. The ranch girls had kept it just as their father had left it when he died, six months before.

Jacqueline gave a comfy sigh. "I *am* glad to be at home," she murmured. "I haven't had any special adventure. Jean, I know you will be disgusted with me, but I got lost and wandered over on the Norton ranch. I met Dan Norton and he was horrid to me. Oh, Frieda darling, hasn't Aunt Ellen saved me anything to eat? I am simply starving," Jacqueline ended, anxious to change the subject.

Aunt Ellen came in at this moment bearing a waiter. She was nearly six feet tall, part Indian and part colored, and she had lived with the Ralstons ever since Mr. and Mrs. Ralston came to Wyoming from the East, bringing Jack, who was then only two years old.

The old woman was frowning and shaking her head, as she put down Jack's supper. "Ought never to have ridden off across the ranch alone, ought not to be coming back home way after dark. I am sure the master

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never would have liked you chilluns living here and trying to run things for yourself," she muttered.

Jack flushed, although she patted the old woman's hand affectionately and said nothing. Jack knew she deserved the scolding and that she would have another from Jim Colter, the manager of their ranch, in the morning. To-night he had led Hotspur away without a word and retired to his own quarters.

No one, excepting strangers, ever called Jacqueline Ralston anything but Jack. She never thought of herself by her pretty French name, except when she wished to appear very grown up and impressive. As for little Frieda, she had been born at Rainbow Ranch house thirteen years before on Christmas eve. She was such a fair little German-looking baby, with her blue eyes and flaxen hair, that her mother gave her the pretty German name of Frieda, which means peace. Mrs. Ralston died when Frieda was only a few months old, but the little girl had fairly earned her name all her life. Peace and War, Jean used to call the two sisters, when she wanted to tease Jack, for Jacqueline was as high-tempered

and determined as Frieda was gentle and serene.

Jean was a slender, graceful maiden, with hair and eyes of the same nut brown color. She had come to live at the ranch ten years before, when her mother, Mr. Ralston's sister, died, and Mr. Ralston decided it would be better to bring up three motherless girls than two. Jean had a gentle, far-away expression, though Jack always asserted that Jean was present when she wanted to be. She only dreamed dreams and wore her aloof expression when people bored her, or when she felt sad and thought she needed sympathy. Jack and Frieda knew no difference in their feeling for Jean and for each other.

When Jacqueline finished supper, she curled herself in a big armchair in front of the fire. Frieda sat on a low stool at her feet while Jean, with an open book, was not far away. Jean was the reader of the three girls, but to-night her book was neglected.

"Out with it, Jack," Jean insisted calmly. "You know perfectly well that you haven't told us all that happened to you this afternoon. Fire away and get it over with, I want to finish my book to-night."

After much urging, Jack told her story in full and Jean flung her book down and danced about the room on her tip-toes, she was so angry, when she heard how Dan Norton had treated her. But she had a different feeling about the young English fellow.

"I really think you were rather horrid, Jacqueline Ralston," she announced coolly. "Of course we can't be having visitors or making friends with any one visiting those hateful Nortons, but I think you might have told that young fellow we would be nice to him when we met him other places. He is a far-off cousin of the Nortons, whose health broke down while he was at college in England and his people sent him over here to recover. His father is a Lord, or a Sir or something, I can't remember which. But Mrs. Simpson says he is awfully nice and—"

Jack put both fingers in her ears. "For goodness sake, hush, Jean Bruce," she protested. "You are such a snob. What difference can it make to us, whether this Frank Kent is a lord or a prizefighter? We certainly can't have anything to do with him. I shan't even speak to him again if I can help it. For the life of me, Jean, I don't see how you

happen to find out the gossip in Wyoming with our ranches five miles apart."

Jean's brown eyes sparkled. She and Jack had many differences of opinion, but to-night Jack was tired and her cousin decided not to answer back.

"Have you gotten your lessons, Frieda?" Jack asked gently a moment later, kissing her hand apologetically to Jean.

Frieda shook her head. She had two long blonde plaits, like a little German girl, with a curl at the end of each one of them. Her cheeks were a faint pink, and her nose tilted just enough to curl her lips up into a smile.

"No," she replied calmly. "Jean offered to hear me recite, but I didn't feel like it. You and Jean haven't studied your French for three evenings. I don't see why I have to do all the studying, because I am the youngest. When we planned to live by ourselves this winter, you and Jean declared that you were going to study three or four hours every day."

Jack pulled Frieda's hair and Jean had just picked up her French grammar with a sigh when there came the noise of some one riding up to the ranch house.

The three girls flew to the window. It was too dark to recognize the figure on horseback. But a few moments later, Aunt Ellen brought in an envelope addressed to "Miss Jacqueline Ralston."

It was a surly note of apology from Dan Norton for his rudeness to her in the afternoon. The girls wondered what in the world had induced him to write it.

Long after Jean and Frieda were asleep, Jacqueline lay awake. She was the oldest and most responsible member of the ranch girl family of three. Frieda was right, she and Jean had been neglecting their studies shamefully. Now and then Jack could not help thinking that perhaps it was not wise for them to live without a teacher or a chaperon. They did not want to grow up perfect green-horns, yet how they hated the idea of introducing a stranger into their home at Rainbow Ranch. Jack was still puzzling, when she fell asleep, with the familiar sound in her ears of the far-off lowing of the wild cattle across the prairie and the distant bark of the faithful sheep dogs.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GIANT'S FACE.

FRIEDA walked ankle deep in purple violets. Her hands were full of them and she carried a brimful basket on her arm.

"What a picture you are, Frieda," Jack called, as she came out on the broad veranda of the ranch house at about eight o'clock the next morning.

"I don't care if we don't make our everlasting fortunes with our violet beds, they are just too sweet for anything! Jean is coming out to help you pick the flowers in a minute; I have got to go down to the rancho to make my peace with Jim."

Jack walked briskly along. It was a gentle October day with a bright sun and warm wind. You seemed to be able to see half way across the world, the horizon line stretched so far beyond you.

One of the ways in which Jean and Frieda had been trying to help to make the ranch pay was by starting a violet farm. Nearly an acre of land near the house had been irrigated and

glistened with the dark green leaves and purple stars of the young plants. The flowers were to be covered with glass later on. Now the fresh morning air was fragrant with their perfume. Of course the flowers had not yet had time to pay for the expense of planting them, but Frieda was eagerly calculating how many bunches she would have to send to the nearest town, when Jean joined her.

"Don't you wish we could spend this whole day out of doors, Jean?" Frieda suggested. "I forgot to say anything about it to Jack, but you know how we have talked about riding over to the Giant's Cañon to have our lunch. Aunt Ellen can pack our saddle bags, and we can join Jack at the rancho."

After a ten minutes' walk, Jacqueline Ralston touched the brim of her broad sombrero hat with a military salute and brought her heels sharply together, when a tall figure came down the path toward her from the rancho with his hands deep in his old leather trousers. She was near the mess-house, where the men who worked the ranch had their quarters. The girls called it "Jim's rancho," to distinguish it from their own home half a mile away.

Jim Colter returned Jack's salute gravely. He was a handsome man of about thirty, with black hair and skin almost as swarthy as a Mexican's. The queer thing about his appearance was that his eyes were as blue and as gentle as a baby's, except when he was angry and then there was no harder man in Wyoming to deal with than the overseer of Rainbow Ranch. Jack would not have dared to let him know how rude Dan Norton had been to her.

Jim was a man of mystery. He came from goodness knows where; no one knew anything of his past. One day, many years before, he rode up to the ranch house nearly dead from fatigue and hunger. Mr. Ralston took him in and he never went away again. But he would not say one word about himself and no one dared to ask him many questions, because his blue eyes would suddenly grow black and angry and he would look as though he were recalling something he wanted to forget.

Jim was devoted to Jack and Jean, but Frieda was his special favorite. She was only two years old when he came to live at Rainbow Ranch, but he taught her to ride and to swim, when other babies were only just learn-

ing to walk. He and Mr. Ralston used to ride all over the great ranch, with Frieda tucked up in front of Jim's saddle and Jack perched behind her father's when both little girls were almost babies. By the time she was fourteen, Jacqueline Ralston, who was her father's shadow, knew the trick of lassoing. There was not a cowboy on the ranch who could ride faster, shoot straighter, or understood more about the business of caring for the cattle and the sheep than she did, and since Mr. Ralston's death, Jim had always consulted Jack about each new business venture.

Jack made her report of yesterday's expedition, but without a word of her meeting with Dan. Jim said nothing about the fright Jack had given them, but Jack found herself blushing and feeling like a little girl, instead of the head of a thousand acre ranch as he looked at her.

"It really wasn't my fault I was out late, yesterday, Jim," Jack apologized. "But we girls have decided to turn over a new leaf. We have made up our minds to stay at home and study, until we are regular blue stockings."

Jim laughed and at this moment glanced up the road. Jean and Frieda were riding

calmly toward them. Jean was leading Hotspur and the three girls' saddle bags were packed as though they were pioneers traveling across the Deadwood trail to the gold regions of California.

Jim chuckled. "Looks like a party of bluestockings from Boston, Jack, coming this way, 'specially that there fishing tackle Jean's carrying. Where was you expecting to spend to-day?" he drawled in a funny Western fashion.

Frieda tucked a small bunch of violets in the buttonhole of Jim's khaki shirt. She wore a blue riding suit and a big Mexican hat like Jack's and her face looked very young and babyish under it. "We are going to the Giant's Cañon, Jim," she said apologetically. "It's such a dream of a day, but Jack doesn't know. We have brought her sketch book and Jean's along and I have my history, so we can get our lessons outdoors and then we can make a fire and have lunch in my own little cave in the rocks."

"We will be back early, Jim," Jean added.

"All right," Jim agreed. His eyes twinkled at the vision of Jean and Jack sketching under the shadow of the great stone peaks

whose broken outline looked like the profile of a giant's face. The Giant's Cañon was five miles across the plains, but the ranch girls were in the habit of riding over to it. Between the ridges of rock, nestling in the deep gorge, were little lakes filled with shimmering trout. One of the rocky caverns in the cañon, Frieda had adopted as her very own. The girls always spoke of it as Frieda's cave.

Frieda's stone castle was really two stories high. A large flat rock jutted out over a second one about eight feet below it while a flight of natural stairs ran from the ground to the floor of the cave.

Frieda unpacked the saddle bags, while Jean and Jack tethered the ponies to a great cottonwood tree not far from the edge of the gorge. The place was entirely deserted, except for an eagle that swooped out of her eyrie and floated above the newcomers' heads. Frieda slipped down the stairs into her cave, spread out her pony's blanket and set to house-keeping, humming as cheerfully as though she had been in her own private room at the ranch. She was not in the least awed by the grandeur and loneliness of the scenery about her. Indeed Frieda was so much at home

in her cavern that she kept an old frying pan hung from one of the sharp points of the rock and some broken dishes stored away in a crevice which formed a kind of natural pantry.

Jean and Jack made a fire, because no camper is really happy without one. Then they religiously got out their sketch books and set to work to make pictures of their three sturdy bronchos munching the buffalo grass in their neighborhood.

Both girls worked patiently for about ten minutes and then Jean sighed once or twice. She had used her eraser oftener than her drawing pencil. Holding her drawing out, she gazed at it critically. Finally she tore it into small bits and strolled over to Jack, to gaze over her shoulder.

"And what be those critturs you are picturing, Friend Reinton?" Jean demanded, in a familiar Western tone. "If they are native to this here state of Wyoming, I ain't never seen 'em before. Be they mules or buffaloes?"

Jack frowned and bit her pencil. "Don't be a goose, Jean," she answered, "and please don't interrupt." Jack surveyed her masterpiece critically. "The ponies do look

a bit queer," she confessed. "One of them has three legs and the other five, but then I haven't worked very long. Do go away and see if you can do any better yourself. You know we solemnly vowed that we were going to sketch an hour each day."

Jean departed to another ten minutes of labor. But the sun was shining gloriously; the day was one long, sunlit delight. She could hear the water trickling over the rocks in the gorge below, and Frieda moving about at her housekeeping. Jean picked up her fishing rod, selected a choice fly and slipped her sketch book into her knapsack.

"Au revoir, Jack dear," she announced cheerfully. "Stay here and look after Frieda. I am going down to the pool to get some trout for lunch." Jean flung some pine knots on their fire, kissed her hand to Frieda and marched off, smiling wickedly at Jack, who was drawing as though her life depended on it. She wished to be an object lesson of industry to slothful Jean.

When Jean had entirely disappeared down the side of the ravine, Jack stopped to gaze sadly at her morning's work. "I am afraid I am not a natural-born artist," she declared

aloud. "It may be all right for geniuses to work from life, but I can't make any headway without a teacher. I wish Cousin Ruth had not put French and drawing into her list of what a young woman should know. They may be easy enough for girls to learn in her beloved old Vermont, but they are pretty hard work out here. I am afraid the ranch girls don't know any of the things they should." Jack's red lips parted. "But it's lots of fun to know the unnecessary things like fishing and riding. Gee whiz, I can't stand working any longer."

Jack leaned over the ledge of rock. Her drawing fluttered down to her sister. "Here Frieda, decorate your cave with that work of art. It looks like a drawing made by the Indians in pre-historic days. You won't mind, will you, if I go away for a while? I won't be out of calling distance and I won't stay long. If you need me, just sing out."

Frieda smiled. Her blue eyes looked like a reflection of the clear sky above them. She had so little idea of feeling any fear, that she did not even trouble to answer Jack's question. There were no more wild animals in the gorge. Besides, the ranch girls knew

that few animals would attack them, except in self-defense.

Frieda climbed down the rocky cliff to fill an old teakettle with water from a spring not far below and then hung it over the fire on a crooked stick. If the water boiled long before Jean and Jack returned, the pleasant, sizzly sound would keep her company. Frieda's house was in order, so she set out her luncheon dishes, arranging them around in a circle on the floor of her cave. In the center, in a broken teacup, she placed the bunch of violets she had worn in her trip across the plain. Still the girls had not returned; Frieda might have studied, but she decided that it would be more fun to enlarge the crevice in the rocks, which formed the storehouse for her kitchen and dining-room utensils.

She struck the rock sharply with a large stone. A piece chipped off, then another. It was red sandstone and not very hard and Frieda was banging away with all her might, when she gave a quick exclamation of surprise. A great crack appeared along one side of the stone wall, and a big boulder crashed down at Frieda's feet. Before her, she beheld

another cavern in the rock, almost as large as the one in which she played.

The little girl jumped back. At any moment she expected to see a pair of wild eyes glaring at her from the rocky retreat, believing that she had accidentally broken into the cave of some animal. But nothing happened; there was no stir, no sound from the darkness inside.

Frieda's heart beat rapidly. Her face was pale from excitement. She looked cautiously into the opening, thrust one small hand into it and drew out a round dish of hard, baked clay, engraved with queer, Indian characters. Frieda gave a shriek of delight, although she did not realize that she had accidentally discovered an important collection of Indian relics. But she was fascinated with the arrow heads and queer Indian dolls that she dug out a second later.

In the midst of her search, Frieda heard a sound that made her heart stand still. At the head of the gorge, about a quarter of a mile away, there was a dense thicket of evergreens. From this direction came a cry of pain and terror. Frieda flew up to the ground above.

"Jean, Jack!" she called. "What has happened? Is one of you hurt? Please come to me." Frieda gave the call, that was always the signal between the three ranch girls. "Oh-oo, Oh-ooo, Oh-oooo," ending in a shrill, drawn-out note, as she touched her lips with her fingers, three times in quick succession.

Then she listened, but neither Jean nor Jack answered her. The ranch girls could hear sounds from afar off, as they had spent their lives in the open country. As Frieda ran forward a few steps, she caught the echo of light feet, flying along the ground. A girl came out of the woods, rushing toward her blindly. But Frieda could not tell who it was or guess what had happened. Was it Jean or Jack?

CHAPTER III.

FRIEDA AND THE OTHER GIRL.

THE apparition drew near enough for Frieda to see that it was a stranger with straight black hair. She was barefoot and wore a short, ragged skirt, a bright red jacket, and a red scarf twisted around her throat. In her startled glance at the girl, Frieda beheld a pair of immense black eyes, set in a thin, pointed face, with cheeks flushed crimson, perhaps from the swiftness of her flight. Her breath came in short gasps. Frieda thought of a fawn she had once seen pursued by some hunters, with its great soft eyes transformed into staring pools of terror and its soft sides quivering as though its heart were breaking in its final effort to evade its pursuers.

"Oh, what is it?" Frieda cried, with quick sympathy.

The girl looked at her hopelessly and ran on. But Frieda now understood. An old Indian woman armed with a stick, trotted out of the screen of the trees. She

was running more slowly but her face was terrifying. Her small black eyes were red with anger and she waved a long arm at the girl.

Frieda wanted to help, but what could she do? "Jean! Jack!" she called again. She could see that the hunted girl had no chance of escaping. She was nearly dropping with exhaustion. There was no place for her to hide, for the plain stretched on, covered only with grass and low sage brush.

Frieda flung herself valiantly in the path of the Indian woman. She was used to the Indians. Ever since she could remember she had been making trips to their villages, and a number of half-breed Indian boys had worked on their ranch. But the girl had never seen one of them so furiously angry as this old squaw. She was frightened and at the same time wanted to laugh. The woman was so fat and in such a temper, "that she shook when she ran, like a bowlful of jelly," Frieda thought to herself.

The squaw did not lift her beady, black eyes until she was within a few feet of Frieda.

"Ugh," she grunted. "Git out."

She tried to push Frieda away with her



FRIEDA FLUNG HERSELF VALIANTLY IN THE PATH OF THE
INDIAN WOMAN.

stick, but Frieda stretched out both arms and danced up and down in front of the old woman, until she did not know which way to turn.

Old Laska had not run all this distance and gotten out of breath to be stopped by a pale-face chit of a child. She struck Frieda with her staff. Frieda gave a sudden, sharp cry and looked quickly around. She saw that the Indian girl had fallen only a short distance beyond them and was vainly struggling to get on her feet again. Frieda shut her eyes; in another moment she knew that she would hear cruel blows being rained down on the defenseless girl by the furious old woman.

At this moment, a golden brown head, wearing a soft, round Mexican hat, appeared above an opening in the gorge. "Frieda, what's the matter? Didn't we hear you call?" Jack's voice rang out unexpectedly. She jumped lightly from the rocks to the ground and ran toward her sister, guessing at once that the Indian woman had frightened Frieda.

"Stop," Jack ordered imperiously.

The woman hesitated. Something in Jack's commanding tone impressed her and at the same instant Jean crawled slowly into sight

above the ravine, swinging a string of trout over her shoulder.

The Giant's Cañon seemed suddenly alive with girls.

Jean gazed at the scene in bewilderment. Jack's hands were clasped behind her and her head was thrown back in a fashion she had when she was angry. Frieda was in tears and between the two sisters stood a fat squaw.

Jack and Jean looked so ready to do battle at a moment's notice, that the Indian's manner changed.

"I want not to hurt the little Missie," she mumbled. "I try to catch my own girl. She run away from her good home. She ver' bad." The old woman's head with its straight black hair, plaited in small braids, bobbed fiercely up and down and she shook her stick threateningly ahead of her.

During the whole scene Jack and Jean had had their backs turned to the hunted girl. Jack was blocking the way of the Indian woman. Only Frieda had been able to see and through her tears she had discovered that the girl, who had been lying helpless on the level ground only a few seconds before, had now vanished completely.

Frieda smiled at Jack's and Jean's puzzled expressions. "Indian girl! What did the old woman mean?" The two girls looked about. There was no one in sight. Evidently the squaw had not intended to hurt Frieda and Jack and Jean were anxious to get rid of her. The next instant the Indian waddled on, though she, too, had lost sight of the fragile figure she was pursuing.

Frieda walked over to the fire and stirred it into a blaze without a word. She winked mysteriously at Jean and Jack, but neither of them had the faintest idea of what she meant.

"Let's fry the fish, before we go down into the cave," Frieda whispered. "I don't want the Indian to come along this way and find out where it is."

Jean and Jack knew that Frieda wished to keep her playhouse a secret from all the world, so they thought nothing of her odd manner.

Frieda was bending over the glowing ashes, humming softly, with her cheeks rosy and her two long blonde plaits fairly trembling with excitement when she noticed the Indian woman coming back toward them. She was

alone. Evidently she had gone on for half a mile or more before she decided it was useless to hunt any longer.

Frieda never looked up. The woman sidled up to Jean and Jack with a wheedling expression on her broad, stupid face.

Jack and Jean paid no attention to her. They were making a pile of shiny fish scales into a silver hill at their feet, as it was their part to clean the trout, while Frieda did the cooking.

The Indian eyed the two girls doubtfully. She firmly believed that one of them had helped the truant to escape, yet they had not stirred from before her eyes, in the time when the runaway girl threw her off the scent.

"You know where my girl is, you hide her from me," the woman said accusingly.

Jean glanced at her in a bored fashion. "Will you please go away?" she demanded. "We are busy. We do not want to talk to you. I told you that we had never seen any Indian girl."

Frieda did not move, but her rosy cheeks burned a deeper red from the heat of the flames.

The squaw waddled slowly out of sight.

What did it matter if she had not caught Olilie? The girl would soon have to return to the hut. She could not live long alone out on the plains and when she came back she should be taught her place. Olilie was only a squaw in spite of the nonsense she had learned at the white people's school. She should do the work and be the slave of the man chief, like all Indian girls had from the beginning.

"Jean, Jack," Frieda hissed softly. She came over toward her cousin and sister with the fish still sizzling and popping in her frying pan.

"Oh, do be careful, Frieda," Jean begged. Some of the hot fat sputtered out of the pan into Jean's lap and she slid backwards off the rock where she was seated.

But Jack saw that something unusual was the matter with Frieda.

"What in the world has happened to you, child? Your eyes are as big as saucers!" she exclaimed.

Frieda set down her pan and though the Indian woman was now well out of sight, she whispered a few words that made both girls jump to their feet.

"Then there was an Indian girl all the time?" Jean murmured.

Frieda nodded. "We must find her," she argued quietly. "She slipped over the side of the gorge not far from here, when no one was looking at her except me. She can't be very far away for she was too tired to have gone much further."

"All right, Frieda," Jack agreed. "We will look for the Indian princess as soon as we have had our lunch. We must eat the fish first, it is so brown and delicious. Really we will have more strength to search if we have some food," Jack pleaded, seeing Frieda's injured expression.

"She will get away, Jack," Frieda answered. "Then she may be lost on the plains and starve and nobody will ever find her. She was so pretty and so frightened that I am sure you would have been interested if you had only seen her."

Jack heaved a deep sigh. "Come along, Jean," she insisted. "Frieda wants us to look for the will-o-the-wisp, so look we must."

Frieda was not tempestuous like Jack and Jean, but, just the same, like a great many other gentle people, she always had her way. "Little Chinook," Jim used to call her, because "Chinook" is the Indian name for a

soft, west wind, that blows so quietly, so persistently, that it carries everything before it. It even wafts all one's troubles away.

Jack, Jean and Frieda crawled down into the great cañon, among the giant rocks, poking their noses into every opening, where they thought it possible that anybody could be concealed. There was no sign of any one, though Frieda called and called, assuring the runaway that the Indian woman had gone back home.

"I am afraid she must have fallen and gotten hurt somehow, Jack," Frieda suggested, when the three girls had explored for half an hour.

Jean turned resolutely upon the two sisters. "I am very sorry, Frieda Ralston," she announced firmly, "but I decline to look for that tiresome girl another minute. I will be fed. I don't see for the life of me, why you are so worried over the fate of an unknown Indian maiden, when your own devoted cousin is perishing before your eyes."

Frieda's cave was soon spread with the luncheon dishes and the girls sat down Turkish fashion, with their long-delayed feast in front of them.

Frieda's face was half buried in a ham sandwich when Jean gave a sudden exclamation of surprise. "Look, girls, there must have been an earthquake or something around here. There is a hole in the rock back of Frieda's cave, nearly as large as this one. Funny we never noticed it this morning!"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Frieda remarked indifferently. "I was banging away there, trying to make my pantry larger, when a huge stone fell out and rolled into the gorge. Lo and behold, there was another cavern! I found some queer Indian relics in it. Come see."

Frieda led the way over to the new pit and dropped down on her knees in front of it, with Jack and Jean on either side of her. "I was afraid to go inside until you came," she said, "but it is quite empty,—look!"

Frieda's breath gave out. She stared and stared, clutching at her cousin and her sister. The three girls were spellbound!

Gazing at them from out the black darkness, was what Frieda had feared at the first moment of her discovery of the mysterious cavity, a pair of burning, glowing eyes. They

might belong to some wild animal, though they were not fierce, only timid and pleading.

The ranch girls were not cowards, but not one of them wished to enter the obscurity of that strange hiding place.

The figure stirred. The girls were now more used to the darkness.

"Why it's the Indian girl!" Frieda cried. "Do come out, please. We won't hurt you and the Indian woman has been gone a long time."

But the girl seemed to be afraid to move. Frieda crawled fearlessly into the hole and gave her little, white hand into the girl's thin, dark one.

As the Indian maid came out into the bright, invigorating air, she tried to stand up, but she swayed in the wind, like a scarlet poppy that is trying to oppose its frail strength to the blast of a storm.

Before Jack and Jean could get to her and in spite of Frieda's efforts, the girl took a step forward, staggered and fell at their feet.

As they picked her up, they discovered that she was flushed with fever. But while Jean washed her face with cool water and Jack held her in her arms, she opened her mournful

black eyes. "I am sorry to have troubled you," she said, without a trace of an Indian accent. "I have run away and I am tired. If you will please give me some water and let me stay here for a few minutes I am sure I will be all right."

But she was not all right, even though the ranch girls persuaded her to eat something, as well as to drink a cup of hot tea. She did not seem to be able to move, but sat perfectly still with her lovely dark head resting between her slender hands. She did not try to explain to them why she had run away from home or when she expected to return.

Jack glanced anxiously upward. They had solemnly promised Jim to be back at the ranch house before dark and the ranch girls could tell the time of day from the position of the sun in the sky. This was one of the things they knew instead of French or drawing. Unless they left the cañon pretty soon, Jack knew they would never get home in time; yet what could they do with Frieda's Indian girl? They could not leave her in the gorge alone, and yet she did not seem to have the strength or the desire to go.

Jack once had seen a copy of a wonderful

picture of Ishmael in the desert, whom Abraham had cast out with his mother, Hagar. Hagar had gone to find some fuel and the child is alone. Around him is a great, grey plain, with nothing else alive on it. There was something in this Indian girl's position, her fragile grace, and dreadful loneliness, that recalled this picture to Jacqueline Ralston's mind. She put her arm gently over the other girl's shoulder.

The Indian maid looked up. Perhaps it was the difference in her appearance and in Jacqueline's that made her eyes fill with tears. Jack's proud, high-bred face was softened to pity. Her grey eyes were tender and the usual proud curve to her lips was changed to an expression that she seldom showed to any one but Frieda or Jean since her father's death.

"We must go back to our home now," Jack explained kindly, "but we can't leave you here alone. Tell us why you ran away? Don't you think you could return; or is there anything we could do for you?"

The girl shook her head. She was as tall as Jean, but so thin that she might be only an overgrown child. She seemed very young to

Jacqueline, almost as young as Frieda and as much in need of some one to take care of her.

The three ranch girls were gazing intently at the stranger.

She flung her hands up over her face again. "I can't go back, I can't," she insisted. "You are to go away. I am not afraid. Only let me stay in this ravine, until I can find some place that is further away, where no one can find me. I shall not be hungry, I can hunt and fish. Only to-day I am tired." She shook, as though she were having a chill.

Jacqueline dropped down on the ground by her side. Frieda and Jean were trying not to cry.

"You poor little thing, you know we can't leave you here," Jack declared. "Won't you? Can't you?" Jack looked appealingly at Jean and Frieda. She was the oldest of the ranch girls, but she never decided anything without their advice. Both of them nodded. "Don't you think you could come home to the ranch with us, until you feel better and can tell us what troubles you? You are ill now and worn out. Why you might even die if you stayed here alone."

Jack did not wait for an answer. She

almost lifted the Indian girl to her feet and brought her out of Frieda's cave. She helped her upon her own pony, and getting up behind Frieda, she led Hotspur and his new rider to the beloved Rainbow Ranch house, whose doors opened to admit not three girls, but four.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RESCUE.

WHEN Olilie, the Indian girl, came back to consciousness, after being put to bed at the ranch house, three days had passed. She lay between broad sheets smelling of violets and whiter than anything she had ever seen, except the new snow on the prairies.

Over in the corner of a big empty room sat a strange little girl. She was sewing on some small doll clothes and humming softly to herself. Two braids like plaited silk of the corn hung over her face. Olilie did not recall ever having seen her before and had not the faintest idea how she happened to be in this wonderful place, instead of the dirty hut of Laska the Indian woman and her son Josef.

Some one else tiptoed softly into the chamber. Olilie half closed her eyes. She remembered this other face faintly, but where and when had she seen it?

"Hasn't she spoken yet?" a voice asked in a disappointed tone. "I am so sorry, but I simply have to ride over the range with Jim

this morning. Some of the cattle keep disappearing. If our patient wants to talk, please don't let her tell you everything before I get back. She must be kept pretty quiet."

Just for a second, Olilie felt that a face bent over hers. But she gave no sign of being awake, although she now knew where she was and how she happened to be there. It had flashed across her memory—her flight, her hiding and the meeting with the ranch girls. She understood that she had been ill but was going to get well again. The hot, uncomfortable feeling had left her head, she had no pain, only she was very weak and she did not think that she could bear to go away from this beautiful place. If only she could have been ill a little longer!

Olilie's wistful, black eyes were wide open, when the bedroom door unclosed the second time. She caught a glimpse of a tall, dark figure and a wave of terror swept over her. Already had Laska come to take her home?

But the woman walked quietly up to the bed, took one of Olilie's thin hands and gazed at it earnestly, turning it over in her own brown palm. She shook her head, smoothed up the covers and nodded to Olilie not to try to talk.

"This girl has been brought up among white people, hasn't she, Frieda?" Aunt Ellen inquired softly.

The blonde plaits moved slightly.

"I am sure I don't know," came a faint voice from between them. "We know nothing about her, except what Jack told you. She did not talk like an Indian, so I suppose she has been to school. Her mother, from whom she was running away, was a full-blooded Indian but she don't look a bit like her." Frieda lowered her voice still further. "Has the Indian woman been here to inquire for her daughter? Jack was afraid she would find out who we were and come over here."

Aunt Ellen gave her head a warning shake and said something to Frieda that the sick girl on the bed could not hear. But Frieda jumped up and her bits of doll dresses scattered about on the floor. "When will Jack and Jim come back?" she demanded quickly. "If we had only known before they went away!"

"Known what?" Olilie asked, as naturally as though she had been taking part in the conversation all the time. "I am quite well now, thank you. If you don't mind, I should like to get out of bed."

Frieda's face turned quite red and her blue eyes were round with surprise. She ran to Olilie and threw her arms around her. "You are well now, aren't you?" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad. Just wait until I run and find Jean. She won't like it unless I tell her at once."

"Child," Aunt Ellen queried, as soon as Frieda went away, "is the Arapaho woman who makes baskets and strings beads at the end of the Wind Creek valley your mother and is the lad Josef her son?"

Olilie nodded. "I think so," she replied. "At least I know of no other woman who is my mother. I have lived with her always."

"But you are not a full-blooded Indian girl," Aunt Ellen argued, "although your hair is so black and straight and your skin is dark. Look," Aunt Ellen picked up the girl's hand again. "See, your finger nails are pink and that is not the case with the red or brown-skinned people." Aunt Ellen opened the girl's gown, and where her skin was untouched by the sun and wind, it was a beautiful olive color.

Aunt Ellen lifted her up, wrapped her in a blue dressing gown and sat her in Frieda's

vacant chair. "It's a hard time ahead of you, child," she murmured to herself. "Mixed blood don't never bring happiness, when one of 'em runs dark."

Jean's and Frieda's faces both wore strange expressions when they came back to their guest. But Olilie did not know them well enough to guess that anything unusual was the matter.

She stretched out both hands humbly and took one of Jean's and one of Frieda's in her own. "Won't you let me thank you for keeping me here and let me tell you why I ran away?" she asked gratefully.

Jean shook her head nervously, her brown eyes fastened on the tight-closed door, against which Aunt Ellen stood like a body-guard. "No, please don't try to tell us anything now," Jean begged. "I am sure you are not strong enough. And Jack, she is the oldest of us, she would like you to wait until she comes back this afternoon."

The ranch house was built on one floor. A long hall led straight through the centre of it. There were four bedrooms beside the living-room and Aunt Ellen's room, which opened off the kitchen. Aunt Ellen and her

husband, Zack, slept on the place and the old man helped Frieda and Jean with their violet beds. To-day he had ridden over to the nearest village to see about the building of the new greenhouses.

A tramp of heavy feet echoed out in the passageway. Jean kept on talking, as though she wished to drown the sound. The Indian girl did not seem to be disturbed. She was too happy and too weak to care much what was going on outside her room.

"Don't you think I might tell you my name at least?" she begged. "It is Olilie, an Indian name. I don't know just what it means. I—"

There were no locks on the doors inside the big hospitable ranch house. What need was there of locking people either out or in, in this great open western land?

Yet Aunt Ellen kept her hand on the door-knob. "You are not to come in here," she insisted fiercely. "I told you to leave our ranch."

The door burst rudely open. The squat ugly figure of Laska appeared inside the room, followed by a young Indian boy, who looked sheepish and ashamed.

"Ugh," grunted the old squaw. "Did you think we no find you? Come, git up. You go with me." She pushed aside Frieda and Jean, who were trying to guard the sick girl.

Olilie's face was so white that no one could have thought her an Indian. She could not speak, she only clutched at the arms of her chair as though nothing could part her from it.

Jean stamped her foot angrily. "Go out of this house at once," she ordered angrily. "How dare you thrust your way in here? Your daughter is too ill for you to move her. Besides, we are going to keep her here until we find out whether you were cruel to her and why she won't live with you."

"No, no, I shall not live with her again," Olilie burst out passionately. "I do not mind the work or the blows, but I will not be a squaw woman. I will not light the pipe, clean the gun, hew the wood and fetch the water for her son. At the school they have taught me that a girl is a boy's equal. I will not, because I am a girl, be a slave. Please, please go." The Indian girl looked not at her mother, but at Josef, the Indian boy. He kept his head down and mumbled something

that only Laska and Olilie could understand.

Laska pointed toward the girl. Then her eyes held her son. "Take her to the tepee of her own people," she commanded. "I know the laws of the white race are many and strange, but they take not the child from her mother, while she is yet young."

Josef went toward Olilie, but Jean's body covered her and he did not dare to thrust the white girl aside.

Frieda flung herself half way out the open window. In front of the ranch was a grove of cottonwood trees, to one side ran a long, winding creek. There was no one in sight, even their watch dog had followed Jack and Jim across the range.

Jean was trying bribery and corruption. She had slipped her hand in her pocket and brought out two bright silver dollars. She held one up before the boy, the other before old Laska. "I will give you these if you will leave the girl with us for a few days longer," she suggested.

The Indian boy did not lift his hand. He was gazing at the figure of his sister in the chair. "I no take her, she sick," he said.

"I no want her to work for me. It is Laska who make her. She not like other Indian girl. She different somehow. She read books. She talk like teachers at school."

Laska seized the boy by the arm and shook him roughly. "You no talk foolish," she declared. "You bring girl home. We take not white money. Always you try to make the Indian sell big things for little."

"Oh, if somebody would only come to help us," Frieda thought despairingly. She saw that Josef had picked Olilie up in his arms. She felt like Sister Anne in the dreadful story of Bluebeard. If she could see a little cloud of dust arising somewhere down the long road that led through the trees from the far trail of the plains, she knew that help would come to them! If only she could catch sight of one of the cowboys returning to the ranch!

Frieda did spy a little dust along the trail on the upper side of the creek. She seized a white scarf from the table near by and waved it frantically out the window. "Help! Help! Jim! Jack! Somebody come quick! We need you!" she cried.

The Indian boy and woman waited, puzzled

and alarmed by the noise that Frieda was making.

Frieda saw a rider catch sight of her signal, plunge down the trail and through the muddy creek, straight to the ranch house door. She knew that it was some one whom she had never seen before in her life, but it did not make the least difference to her.

"Won't you come in here?" she begged. "The door is open. There are some Indians trying to steal a girl away—" Frieda drew her blonde head back inside the window, just in time to see the stranger stalk into their room.

"Put the girl down," he commanded Josef in a tone of authority. Nothing loath, the Indian boy returned Ollie to her chair. The newcomer then spoke to the surly Indian w^h man. "You and your son leave this ranch at once. It was fortunate that I learned that you were coming here this morning. I rode over just in time."

The young man had brown hair and eyes. His face was quite pale. He did not look in the least strong, but there was something in his quiet manner that showed he was accustomed to being obeyed.

"We come back to get my girl, when she well," the Indian woman threatened, as the door closed behind her.

There was an awkward silence when the Indians had gone. The young fellow immediately lost his grown-up manner and seemed very uncertain and shy. He colored and held his new cowboy hat in his hands.

"I am awfully glad I turned up in time to help you drive those people out of the house," he declared. "I happened to hear that they were coming over to your ranch to take the Indian girl away from you to-day. If there had been anybody to send over to tell you, I wouldn't have come myself," he ended. "Will you please tell the older Miss Ralston this. I won't intrude on you any longer. Good-bye."

Jean laughed and held out her hand. "Please don't go quite yet," she said. "At least stay until we thank you. I know who you are and Jack will be just as grateful to you as Frieda and I are. You must not think she is always so unfriendly. Aren't you Frank Kent, the English fellow who is the guest of the Nortons? Jack told us about you. But you see the Nortons are—"

"Yes, I understand," Frank Kent answered quickly. "At least I have been told what the trouble is between you, but I hope it may be a mistake. I can't believe Mr. Norton and Dan—" Frank stopped. Jean's and Frieda's cheeks were crimson. He realized that he had no right to talk about their private affairs. Aunt Ellen was looking at him suspiciously.

Frank Kent bowed. "I think I had better go," he announced. Just as he started out of the room, Jacqueline Ralston marched into it. Every bit of color left her face and she stared at him in blank astonishment.

CHAPTER V.

SEEKING ADVICE.

JEAN giggled. Frank Kent and Jack were so funny. They both turned and glared at her with reproachful eyes.

"I hope you don't think I have intruded," Frank protested hotly.

"Oh, no, certainly not," Jack answered with frozen politeness. "That is, at least,—I don't understand."

The scene was enough to have bewildered almost anybody. The quiet room where Jack had left the Indian girl half unconscious and guarded only by tranquil Frieda, was now in a state of suppressed excitement.

Olilie lay back in her chair with the same expression on her face that she had worn on the day she was discovered. Aunt Ellen had her eyes rolled back so that only the whites were showing. Frieda was bouncing up and down, she was so agitated, and Jean looked as though she had been through the war. And in the midst of the family group stood the strange young fellow whom Jacqueline

had met on the Norton ranch and most cordially requested not to make their acquaintance.

Frieda rushed into the breach. "Oh, Jack, the most awfullest thing almost happened!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands and forgetting her grammar in her hurry. "That dreadful old Indian woman and a boy came here and tried to drag Ollie away. I hollered and hollered out the window for Jim or you or anybody to come drive them off, and he came," Frieda bobbed her head at their visitor.

She was so excited that Jean and Jack laughed. But Frank Kent did not smile the least bit. You see he was English and English people don't see jokes quickly. Besides, he was angry at Jack's first suspicion of him. He guessed by her high and mighty manner that she thought he had come to the ranch against her wishes.

He looked so stiff and unfriendly that Jacqueline did not know what to say first.

"Your cousin will tell you how I happened to be near," he said icily, backing out the door.

Jack rushed after him, nearly tripping over the spurs on her riding boots. "Please don't

go quite yet," she begged. "At least let me thank you for whatever you did." Jack had a way of smiling suddenly that changed her whole expression, and made people forgive her almost anything. "Won't you please come into the living-room and one of you tell me calmly exactly what has happened, or I shall simply die of curiosity."

Jack led the way into the big, sunlit room, followed by Jean and more slowly by Frank Kent.

"O! dear here's a kettle of fish," Jack sighed, when Jean finished her story. She didn't think of her slang till she saw Frank's puzzled expression, then she blushed. "I am afraid we can't keep this little Indian girl at the ranch, Jean, if her own people will have her," Jack went on. "You see I had a long talk with Jim this morning. He says we must not make the Indians in the neighborhood angry with us. They will say we kidnapped the girl, or something horrid. And we have troubles enough without that." A second after Jack was ashamed of having spoken of their difficulties before a perfect stranger.

To tell the truth affairs were not going very

well at Rainbow Ranch. The big creek which ran along through Rainbow Valley for nearly a mile and supplied their ranch with water was almost dry in the middle of October. There might soon be nothing for the cattle and horses to drink until the winter snows fell. Jim had confided to Jack that he suspected some one was draining their creek by digging a channel for the water lower down the valley. He could not find out, but if it were true, it meant ruin for the ranch girls! There was another, even more serious difficulty, that might be in store for them, but of this the girls would not speak.

"Has anything happened, Jack?" Jean asked hurriedly.

Jack shook her head. "Nothing unusual," she replied. "Only I shall feel dreadfully sorry if we have to send the Indian girl back to her people. You and Frieda must not think I am hateful if we find we have to."

Frank Kent forgot his English shyness.

"You girls are just bully to be fighting this strange girl's battles," he broke in. "I wonder if you wouldn't let me help you! I believe there is something queer about her parentage anyhow. Even an English duffer

like I am, can tell by looking at her that she isn't a full-blooded Indian."

Frank's face turned red as a beet and he stammered hurriedly. "Of course if you let me help you in this, we need not know each other afterwards."

Jacqueline was as fiery red as her guest and Jean giggled again.

"We couldn't be as horrid as all that," Jack declared in a straightforward fashion, exactly like another boy would have done. "We would not make use of you and then cut you afterwards. And please don't be angry with us, if I tell you again, that we simply can't be anything but just acquaintances with the Nortons' relatives or friends. You understand, don't you?" Jack held out her hand as though she did not know just what to do or say. Jean wouldn't utter a word to help her.

Frank Kent shook Jack's hand warmly and this time he did not seem offended.

"All right," he answered sadly. "But if there is ever anything I can do to help you, I am going to do it, whether we are friends or not."

And though Jack and Jean did not see how

this strange fellow could ever be mixed up in their affairs, they were comforted somehow by what he promised.

"I am going over to Mrs. Simpson's this afternoon, Jean," Jack announced a few minutes after their guest's departure. "I know people say that we ranch girls never take anybody's advice, but just the same I am going to ask Mrs. Simpson what we had better do about this Indian child. Will you come along?"

Mrs. Simpson, the ranch girls' most intimate friend, and her husband were the wealthiest ranch owners in that part of Wyoming. She was a typical Western woman, with a big heart and a sharp tongue. She used to lecture the girls and at the same time was awfully proud of their courage and independence.

"I'm game, Jack," Jean agreed, "but I haven't any proper riding habit. I wouldn't mind a bit if that wretched niece of Mrs. Simpson's wasn't there. I wish you had seen how she stared at me the other day when I called Mrs. Simpson, Aunt Sallie, as though we hadn't called her Aunt all the days of our youth. Do you think Aunt Ellen could mend this for me before we go?" Jean held

up a green broadcloth riding habit very much the worse for wear, with a long ugly rent in it.

"You need a new habit dreadfully, Jean," Jack declared. "I am afraid we haven't any really proper clothes. The worst of it is, I don't know just what we ought to have or where to get them. I wonder if we are too much like boys?"

"What's the odds, Jack, so long as we are happy," Jean sang out cheerfully. "Besides, Jim says that money hasn't been flowing in to Rainbow Ranch any too plentifully lately. It takes pretty much all he can get hold of to run things, so I thought I wouldn't trouble about another habit. But the idea of that fashionable Miss Laura Post, from Miss Beatty's school, New York City, staring at me with her china-blue eyes does rattle me. She and her mother treat us exactly as though we were a Wild West show. Besides it is my unpleasant impression that I had this same tear in my skirt when I rode over to Aunt Sallie's the last time."

"Jean, you are lazy; why didn't you mend it yourself?" Jack scolded. "You know Aunt Ellen can't sew a bit. Isn't it dreadful that little Frieda is the only one of us who ever

touches a needle and she has no one to show her how to sew, poor baby. Come along, I'll see what I can do with your old skirt. Let's go in the Indian girl's room while I do my worst, best, I mean."

Olilie had very little to tell her rescuers of her history. She could not explain why Laska wanted her to live with her, because she had always hated her and been unkind to her. Olilie had but one friend, a teacher in the Indian school in the Indian village in Wind Creek valley. The sick girl did not talk so freely before Jack, as she seemed a little afraid of her, but she begged the girls to find her a home at one of the ranch houses where she might earn her living, for she declared that she would never go back to the "Crow's nest," as old Laska's hut was called.

Jack and Jean galloped swiftly over the ten miles that lay between their ranch and the Simpson's. No one could grow tired, no matter how long the ride, in this glorious October air in Wyoming, as clear and sparkling as crystal. The girls forgot their difficulties, also they quite failed to remember the languid young lady from the East who was Mrs. Simpson's adored niece.

A mile from the Simpson ranch house, Jean stood up in her saddle and waved a challenge to Jack. "Beat you to the veranda!" she called back, loosening the reins on her pony's neck and giving him a light cut with her quirt.

Jean was off like a shot before Jack could get a start. She reached the porch several yards ahead of her cousin. But Jack was determined not to be outclassed as a rider. Just in front of the house was a row of hitching posts about five feet high. "Clear the track," Jack shouted.

She thrust her feet forward in their long, loose Western stirrups, threw her body back and her pony rose in the air like a bird, straight over the posts, and she landed at Jean's side with a small Indian war-whoop of triumph.

A languid clap of hands from the front porch and a horrified exclamation, made Jean's cheeks burn and Jack's grey eyes kindle.

"Buffalo Bill at his best! I congratulate you," a soft voice exclaimed. "I wish you had more of an audience."

Jack laughed lightly. "Oh, we can do ever so much better than that, when we try, Miss Post; perhaps if you stay out West for a

while we may show you how to ride. We would be glad to do anything for Aunt Sallie's guest." Jack's tones were sweetly innocent, but Jean snickered.

Laura Post bit her lips angrily. "Teach Laura to ride?" her mother protested indignantly. "Why my daughter has been trained in the best New York riding academies. I am afraid they would not care for your Western riding in Central Park."

Jean did not see how in the world Jacqueline could appear so undisturbed by the vision of elegance which confronted them. Laura was dressed in a soft cream flannel skirt and coat with a pale blue blouse and wore a big felt hat with a blue pompon on it, to shade her delicate peaches-and-cream skin. Jean felt Laura's eyes fasten on the long rent in her riding skirt, which Jack had mended, with such an expression of superior amusement that she wanted to pull her hair or to scratch her, or to do something else that was violent.

Laura Post was a very pretty girl, all daintiness and fluffiness. She had very light curly hair and blue eyes, and she looked as though she had never done anything for herself in her life. Her mother was just like her,

only a more faded and dressed-up edition. Jean did not know why they both made her feel so awkward, as though it were dreadfully inelegant to have one's skin tanned and hair blown by a long, glorious ride across the open country.

Mrs. Post and Laura would not go when Mrs. Simpson came out and sat down by the ranch girls, holding Jean's hand in one of hers and Jack's in the other, and wondering why Jean, who was her favorite of the three ranch girls, looked so hot and uncomfortable.

"The first thing for you to do, Jacqueline Ralston, is to bring this Indian girl over here for me to take a look at her," Mrs. Simpson announced at the end of Jack's story. "I was going to send a note over to you this very afternoon. I want you children to come over to spend a few days with us. I would like Laura to have some real Western parties and good times, and I think the best way is to have you stay right here with us. There isn't any other way to manage with you young people so far from one another, so bring your Indian girl to our house party. I confess I am curious to see her."

"You are awfully good, Mrs. Simpson, but I am afraid we can't come," Jack answered

gratefully. In spite of the fact that Laura and her mother were both staring at her, Jack went on: "You see we have not the right clothes to stay on a house party. I am afraid we don't even understand just what we ought to have. Father did not know much about girls' things and we have never had any one else to tell us, and besides I don't think your niece would like to have an Indian girl for her guest. Olilie is awfully shy, and I don't expect she would know how to behave."

Mrs. Simpson gave Jack a little shake. "Nonsense, Jacqueline Ralston, what perfect foolishness you are talking! When did you begin to worry about clothes? You know that you and Jean are belles wherever you are. As for Laura, I am sure she will be glad enough to have the Indian girl and I'll look after the child. I want to study her. If she is a regular Indian, she would probably be hard to manage."

Laura shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Oh yes, please do bring the Indian maiden with you," she remarked with an innocent, babyish expression that fooled her Aunt but not her visitors. "I am sure the Indian can't be any queerer than the other people one meets out West."

CHAPTER VI.

THE ARRIVAL AT THE HOUSE PARTY.

"I CAN'T call you Ohlie, it is too long and too funny a name," Frieda announced.

The four girls were being driven over to the Simpson ranch in a big wagon, which was used in the spring as one of the mess-wagons at the roundup, when the cowboys brought in the stock to be branded.

Jack sat on the driver's seat with Jim; Frieda, Jean and Olilie were on piles of straw in the back. There was a big, rusty valise between them which contained the entire wardrobe of the four members of the house party from Rainbow Ranch.

Jean and Jack had even fewer costumes than usual, for they had divided their belongings with the Indian girl, and the valise was the very same one that Mr. Ralston had brought across the prairies with him fourteen years before. It had never dawned on the girls that it was shabby and old-fashioned looking, as they had never traveled more than a few miles from the ranch and knew

nothing of stylish suit cases and leather hand-bags.

Jack screwed her head around at Frieda's words: "I wonder if you would mind our calling you Olive, instead of Olilie," she suggested. "It is ever so much easier to say, and I have always thought Olive a perfectly beautiful name. Besides you seem like a wild olive, you are so pretty and Spanish-looking." Jack spoke carelessly, not dreaming that the young, captive girl had conceived the deepest devotion to her. Olilie was grateful to Jean and Frieda for their kindness to her, but as long as she lived she would remember that it was Jacqueline who had put her arms about her and brought her to the ranch house on the day she had decided that she could bear life with old Laska no longer. Olilie was too shy to show what she felt, but Jack was to find it out some day in a wonderful way.

"I shall be very glad to have you call me, Olive," she answered, in the musical tones that surprised everybody acquainted with the guttural sounds the Indians make in trying to speak English.

Jim turned to stare back of him. He was

very much displeased with this latest escapade of the ranch girls, and had no idea of giving his consent to their keeping this girl. Already he had ridden over to tell Laska and Josef that they could have her back in a few days. Frieda and Jean were treating this Indian wench like a sister, and a stop had to be put to their nonsense. Jim swallowed hard as he caught sight of Olilie whom he had seen but a few times before to-day: "Kind of wish the girls had never run across this one," he muttered to himself. "They have got plenty to do to take care of themselves."

Olilie looked to-day as you would imagine a gypsy maiden appeared long years ago in her own land of Romany. She had on a faded blue gown of Jean's and a cape of Jack's; her hair was parted in the middle, like Jack's and Frieda's and plaited in two braids, coming way down over her low broad forehead. Her eyes were long and narrow, of a clear burning black, her skin a dark olive and her color spread all over her cheeks instead of centering in single, bright patches.

"Jack," Jim whispered, "don't you say too much at the Simpson's about keeping this Indian girl at Rainbow Ranch and don't you

be telling anything at this house party about what is worrying us. What we want to do is to keep mum and fight our own battles; if we get the Indians against us, the cattle and horses will disappear faster than they are going now."

There were at least a dozen young people, the sons and daughters of the most prosperous ranchmen in that part of Wyoming, scattered all about the front of the Simpson ranch house when the girls drove up in their old wagon. An automobile stood in front of the door, for Mr. Simpson was an up-to-date cattleman and rode around his vast place in a sixty horse-power machine, instead of on the back of a shaggy broncho.

"Hurrah for the Ranch Girls of Rainbow Lodge!" some one shouted. Jack and Jean and Frieda waved their hands, but Olive was too frightened to stir.

The girls tumbled out of the wagon one over the other, trying to speak to all their friends at once. People did not see each other every day out West as they do in smaller places, and a house party like Mrs. Simpson's was a notable event.

Frieda kept tight hold on Olive, knowing

that she was feeling shy and the little girl was glad to have a companion herself, as most of the other young people were older.

Mrs. Simpson stared curiously at her unknown visitor. Then she patted her kindly. "Laura does not see that you have come," she explained to the little group.

Jack and Jean glanced up at one end of the long veranda. Laura could plainly see their arrival. But she made no effort to welcome them. She was talking to two boys.

"Children, perhaps I ought to have told you," Mrs. Simpson whispered, "I simply had to invite Dan Norton and his guest to our house party, for Laura likes Dan better than any one she has met in the neighborhood. And I don't approve of you girls carrying on an old feud simply because your father and Dan's were enemies."

Jack had her head in the air and her cheeks were scarlet. Jean openly rebelled: "You ought to have told us, Aunt Sallie, you know we have a perfect right to hate those Nortons," she murmured.

"Of course we will be as polite as we know how," Jacqueline agreed. But Mrs. Simpson frowned; she knew Jack's high temper and

she feared there would be a clash between her and Dan before the house party was over.

"How do you do, Miss Ralston, and Miss Bruce and Frieda," Laura Post said frigidly, holding her hand so high up in the air to shake hands that it almost touched her nose. "I suppose you know Mr. Norton and his guest, Mr. Kent." Laura had not paid the least attention to the existence of the Indian girl. Olilie might have been a wooden image.

Jack bowed coldly as though she were speaking to perfect strangers. But Jean's brown eyes laughed and Frieda held out her hand innocently to Frank Kent: "I am awfully glad to see you again," she said. "See, things are quite all right so far. We still have our new friend with us."

Jack could not help flashing a grateful look at Frank Kent. He came over at once and bowed in his best English fashion to Olive, and then stood by her while the others were talking.

"There goes the latest addition to the wonderful maidens who are running their own ranch," Laura breathed in an undertone to Dan Norton, as the newcomers moved toward the door to go to their rooms.

Dan laughed. "Their ranch, did you say? We have a different idea over at our place as to whom Rainbow Ranch belongs. Those girls are a bit too sure of themselves; I expect to see their pride taken down a peg or two some day."

"What do you mean?" Laura whispered excitedly, her cheeks getting pinker and her eyes sparkling from curiosity.

Dan shrugged his shoulders and waited until he was sure that Frank could not hear him. "Oh, we don't talk about it much out here; remember I am telling you this in the strictest confidence," he went on. "But Rainbow Ranch actually belongs to my father and me. You see, it is like this: Father came to Wyoming before Mr. Ralston did. And father and some friends laid claim to the best part of the Ralston ranch. Mr. Ralston says he bought the ranch from father's friends and father says he had already purchased their part. So you understand the mix-up. But the bully thing is, that since Mr. Ralston's death the girls have never been able to find his title to the property. They haven't a sign of a paper to prove they are the owners of Rainbow Ranch. Court

records did not use, to be kept very well in Wyoming. We are not sure about it, but father is working quietly. Some day we will bring suit and just take possession of their place; won't it be corking? Rainbow Ranch is right next ours, and when we get it we will have the biggest ranch in this part of the state. If you stay out here long enough, you may see some fun."

Laura nodded eagerly. She did not like the ranch girls, besides she was one of the disagreeable persons who dearly love to see other people in hot water. She did not mind how much it hurt them so long as it did not affect her. "No, I will never tell anybody what you have told me," she agreed confidentially. "Only if anything should develop, you will be sure to tell me about it, won't you?" she begged.

CHAPTER VII.

A VISIT TO OLD LASKA.

"**J**ACK, Aunt Sallie will take us over to the Indian village this afternoon if you wish to go," Jean said next day.

Jean and Jack thought they were entirely alone. They did not realize that the door of the little room next theirs, which Frieda and the Indian girl occupied, was open.

"Why should we go to the village, Jean?" Jack inquired indifferently. She had just discovered a thrilling novel and she wanted to be left in peace to read it.

"Because something has to be done about Olive at once," Jean insisted valiantly. "You know perfectly well, that it isn't fair for us to keep her in suspense about what is to become of her and then maybe turn her off and send her back to old Laska in the end. We must find out if there is any chance of her not being Laska's real child and if not, what right she has to her. Aunt Sallie says she will keep Olive here as a maid for Laura if we don't

want her at the ranch and we can get her away from the Indians."

"Maid for Laura!" Jack bit her lips indignantly. Jean kept her face turned away, so that Jack could not see her expression. She knew that her cousin was very undecided about what they ought to do with their protégée and was anxious to influence Jack for Olive's sake.

"I don't think that Olilie—I mean Olive—is very well suited for such a distinguished position as maid to Miss Laura Post," Jack replied. "I think if I were the Indian girl I should prefer to remain with the Indians. Of course I will go over to the village with you and Aunt Sallie whenever you like."

Jean put her arm around her cousin. "You won't be cross about something if I tell you, will you?" she urged coaxingly.

Jack frowned. "I don't know, Jean Bruce, what is it now?" she demanded, for she could guess by the half mischievous, half conciliatory expression in Jean's brown eyes, that she had something to confide which would not be to her liking.

"Aunt Sallie has asked Frank Kent to drive over to the Indian village with us,"

Jean returned. "You see he has never seen an Indian village, and being an Englishman, Aunt Sallie naturally thought he would be curious about one. So after all he is going to help us to find out about Olive, although you refused to allow him. Funny, isn't it?"

This was a very unwise fashion for Jean Bruce to have explained the situation to Jack, for if there was one thing which Miss Jacqueline Ralston did particularly like, it was to have her own way. Having said that she desired no assistance from their new acquaintance in their efforts for Olilie, she was not going to be forced into accepting it against her will.

Jack quietly removed her big Mexican hat, sat down comfortably in her chair and reopened her book. "Oh, very well," she remarked carelessly. "Then I won't go with you at all. My presence won't be in the least necessary. You and Aunt Sallie and Mr. Kent can make all the investigations and decide what is best to do without any interference from me."

Jack arched her level brows, dilated her nostrils and half closed her eyes. Jean knew that particular obstinate expression of her

cousin's and said nothing more for a few moments, but put on her own coat and hat and started to leave the room. At the door she turned to her cousin. "Jacqueline Ralston," she inquired coolly, "has it ever occurred to you, that you are a very hard-headed and selfish person?"

Jack's grey eyes grew steely. "Oh, do go on, Jean dear," she urged politely. "Tell me any other nice things you know about me; one always is appreciated by one's relatives."

Jean flushed. "Don't be so hateful, Jack," she pleaded. "Can't you see that it is selfish of you to refuse to go with us to try to find out about Olilie? You brought her home to the ranch, and you know you will be able to stand up for her and find out more about her than either Aunt Sallie or I can. Aunt Sallie means well, but goodness knows she isn't tactful. And you know you are obstinate to stay at home simply because Frank Kent is to go with us. Aunt Sallie did not know what you had said to him, and simply wanted to show him one of our modern Indian settlements. It is one of the things he came West to see."

"Oh, I don't blame Aunt Sallie," Jack

replied, slightly appeased by Jean's half-hearted apology.

"Well, you needn't blame Frank Kent, either," Jean retorted quickly. "You can put every bit of the blame on me. Frank Kent told Aunt Sallie that he did not think he would care to go with us and behaved so queer and stiffish that she was offended with him. I knew he was thinking about what you had said, so I just marched up to him and told him that if he had refused Mrs. Simpson's invitation because he thought you would not wish him to come along with us, he was entirely mistaken. You see I thought you would not want him to give up the pleasure of the trip, just on your account. He is a guest here with us and I can see no sense in your being so uppish. It is perfectly foolish, Jack." This time Jean opened the door. "Jacqueline Ralston, c-h-u-m-p spells chump. It is exactly what you are."

Jack's bad tempers had a way of ending abruptly. "Wait a minute, please, Jean," she called persuasively, "I expect you are right. I will come along."

Jean gave Jack a hug as they went out of the room together, which was intended to

convey the idea that, though what she had just said to her cousin was perfectly true, she was sorry to have been obliged to say it.

Jack had another shock as she was about to get into the Simpson motor car. Seated on the comfortable rear seat and engaged in airy conversation were Dan Norton and Laura Post with Mrs. Simpson beside them. Jean and Jean's special friend, Harry Pryer occupied the centre chairs. So Jack and Frank Kent, as the car only held seven people, were compelled to crowd in front with the chauffeur.

"You are sure you don't mind my going over with you," said Frank Kent in an apologetic tone and turning a deep red. "I can just as easily stay at the ranch, if you prefer it."

No girl could be proof against such good manners as Frank Kent's, certainly not Jacqueline Ralston.

The Indian village was not so very far from the Simpson ranch, in the way that Western people count distances. Pretty soon the automobile party saw circles of smoke arising in the air. On a rounded green slope of the

prairie near a little river was a collection of wigwams and huts.

"I am jolly glad some of the Indians still live in tepees," Frank confided to Jack. "I was dreadfully afraid that your up-to-date, government-cared-for 'Injun,' was going to be just like everybody else and wear store clothes and live in a regular American house, and then what could I have to tell my people when I go back home to England?"

Frank was staring ahead of him and for the first time since his first meeting with Jack, he had entirely gotten over his British shyness.

"Don't you worry," Jack answered gaily. "I am awfully glad you have come with us. Now you'll see the real thing! Of course, some of our Indians have been educated and civilized, but I am sure many of them are just the same in their hearts as they used to be, and would lead the same kind of lives if they had a chance. I can tell you they try to get their revenge, if you make them angry!"

There were a number of lean horses grazing near the village. The streets were dreadfully dirty and overflowing with thin, brown children rolling in the sand and playing with wolfish, half-fed dogs. In front of the rude

huts or the cone-shaped tents with sheafs of poles extending through their tops, were big Indian men, as solemn, silent and terrifying as though they had been Indian war chiefs meditating on some terrible massacre. Most of them wore fringed leather trousers and had bright blankets wrapped about them. They were calmly smoking, and only barely turned their narrow eyes to glance at the automobile, as it passed by them.

Near most of the dwellings were outdoor fires, with pots boiling above them, as few of the Indians can make up their minds to use kitchen stoves instead of their familiar campfires. Old women sat near the fires, stringing bright beads, or weaving mats. Some of them were making Indian blankets on rude frames of logs, set upright some feet apart, and strung with cords, like an old-fashioned wooden loom.

The chauffeur slowed down and the girls and boys could see that the Indians were talking about their party, making queer sounds and signs to one another. The women rushed out with trinkets to sell, the children sat cross-legged in the dirt, the dogs barked and young women with babies on their backs crept out

of their doors. But among the whole number, there was no sign of Laska or Josef.

Laura bought quantities of Indian bead-work and pottery. She would not let her Aunt inquire for the Indian girl's people until she had seen everything there was to be seen. Frank timidly offered Jack a string of blue beads, when he saw that Jean had accepted a small gift from Harry Pryor, and Jack received them very graciously, wishing to show that she no longer resented Frank's having made the trip.

"Can you tell me where to find the home of Laska?" Mrs. Simpson inquired of an Indian girl, who looked more intelligent than the others and spoke very good English.

The girl shook her head. "Don't know," she replied stupidly. Mrs. Simpson asked half a dozen other people. Some of them spoke, others only grunted dully. "Crow's Nest," Laska's hut, had apparently never been heard of.

"Let's don't waste time asking questions, Aunt Sallie," Jack called back. "The Indians won't tell you about each other unless they know what you want. Let's drive straight to the school; Olilie's teacher can best tell us what to do."

In the midst of the Indian village were three well-built houses, the trading store, a small church and the school. Mrs. Simpson and Jack went into the schoolhouse together and were gone for half an hour. When they came out, Jack's face was crimson with excitement and Mrs. Simpson looked deeply interested. She entered the car after telling her chauffeur exactly how to find old Laska's hut, but neither she nor Jack gave any account to the others of what the teacher at the Indian school had told them of Olilie.

Jean could not bear it. She gave Jack a little shake. "What are you so mysterious about?" she questioned softly. "Olilie is not Laska's child, is she? You have found out something about her and you don't dare tell."

Jack hesitated. "It is queerer than we thought," she confessed. "Mrs. Merton, Olilie's teacher, does not think that Olilie is Laska's child, but she has no way of proving it. The funny thing is, she says that Laska gets money each month for taking care of Olilie and that is why she does not wish to give her up. No one knows who sends her the money nor where it comes from, Mrs. Merton says. But maybe if we tell Laska that she can keep

this money if she lets us have Olilie, she will give her up to us. Mrs. Merton has tried to get Olilie away from Laska herself and to find out more about her, but she has never learned the least little thing."

Laska's hut was better than many of the other Indian houses, being made of timber plastered with mud and with a dirt roof. The door was half open, but it was impossible to tell whether any one inside saw the approach of the automobile.

Jack and Jean ran up the path ahead, without waiting for Mrs. Simpson and were almost at Laska's door when a low, savage growl stopped them. Jean stepped back a moment and clutched at Jack's skirts, but Jack went on without thinking of danger. She only half heard Jean's cry of warning as she lifted her hand to knock on the door. In that second a great, grey figure sprang up in front of her and Jack saw two rows of sharp teeth on a level with her throat. She had lived all her life among the wild animals of the prairies and of the ranch, and knew that if, in a second of danger, she flinched or showed cowardice, she was lost. How she was able to stand perfectly still for that second she did

not know, for a moment later, she gasped and turned white as a sheet, but Jean and Mrs. Simpson caught her. Frank Kent had managed in some remarkable fashion to get in front of Jack and strike down the huge brute with his stick. A few minutes later Laska came to the door of her hut. She had seen Jean and Jack approaching alone and had not known what friends they had with them.

A long and useless conversation followed. Laska would give no satisfaction about Olilie, insisting that the girl was her child, that she knew nothing of any money that came for her care. Josef was away, but they both wanted the girl to return home.

Mrs. Simpson grew weary of argument and pleading. "Look here, Laska," she said at last, "we are not going to allow the Indian girl to come back to you. Any one could look at you both and see that she is not your own child, and if you try to get her away from us or to molest her in any way, I shall make it my business to find out who sends you money for her and you shall have neither the money nor the girl."

Laska made no further objection, but

neither Jean, nor Jack, nor Frank Kent liked the expression of her face, as she watched them leave her cabin. She made a sign of some kind in the air and mumbled a curious Indian incantation that had a menacing sound.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ESCAPE FROM THE DANCE.

"IT is all settled, Laura dear," Mrs. Simpson announced comfortably as the automobile drew up in front of her ranch-house door. "The Indian girl is to stay with us and be your maid, as your mother says you are accustomed to having some one to look after you, and Mrs. Merton tells me she has taught this Olilie how to behave about a house. She seems to have made quite a pet of her. I haven't talked it over with Jean and Jack yet, but I am sure it would be most unwise for them to attempt to keep the Indian girl at their ranch. They have Aunt Ellen and Zack to do their work, and indeed they ought to have some one to look after them, instead of undertaking to care for some one else." Mrs. Simpson nodded emphatically. She was fond of giving advice, a little more fond than Jean and Jack were of receiving it.

The ranch girls said nothing, but Frank broke in to the conversation, unexpectedly. "Oh, I say, Mrs. Simpson," he remarked

thoughtfully. "Don't you know, this Olilie, or Olive as you sometimes call her, don't strike me in the least as belonging to the servant class. Of course we look at these things differently in England from what you do out West, but this girl is so gentle and refined, it seems to me she ought to have a real chance."

Jack smiled gratefully, with her head turned away. "I think so too," she murmured to herself. "I only wish we knew how to manage it."

The house party was to have a dance at the ranch house that evening. Jean and Jack and Frieda had never had any real dancing lessons, but the two older girls were accustomed to going to the informal parties at the other ranch houses. They knew how to dance the waltz, two-step and quadrille, and it never occurred to them that Laura would try to introduce the new style dances at their Western party. Of course some of her guests had been to schools in the big Western cities and understood the latest dances. Dan Norton had spent a year at the Leland Stanford University, and, though he had not been able to pass his Sophomore exams., he considered himself very superior to the boys and girls

who had never been away either to college or school.

The three ranch girls were not worried about their dancing, but they were about their costumes. Mrs. Simpson had suggested that Olive would feel shy, if she came to the party, and she was grateful to be left out. If only Jean and Jack would tell her what they had found out at the Indian village, and what they meant to do with her! But the girls did not realize that the Indian girl knew anything of their trip of the afternoon or that she was eating her heart out in silence rather than ask them what had occurred.

Jean shook out her party dress anxiously; Jack surveyed hers with an expression half of affection and half of disdain. The dresses were their best last summer frocks and Jim had gone over to Laramie and brought them home with him in triumph. They were not what the girls would have chosen for themselves, but they had been proud of them until to-night.

"Do you think she will laugh at us, Jack?" Jean inquired, bravely. "I am sure I don't care if she does."

At least poor Jim had had a good eye for

color, if the materials he had chosen for the girls' gowns were odd.

Jean's was a soft rose color, just the shade of the wild rose that covers the western prairies in the early spring and the girl smiled slightly as she looked at herself critically in the glass. The gown was becoming to her nut-brown hair and eyes and her clear, colorless skin.

Jack was dressing Frieda in a corner. "You are pretty as a picture, Jean!" she insisted. "Please don't care so much about what Laura Post may think. Come and kiss Frieda, she is sweet enough to eat."

Frieda's costume was the prettiest of the three, although it was of coarse white embroidery, such as only a man would buy. Her long blonde hair was freshly braided and tied with pale blue ribbons, and around her plump little waist was a blue sash which in color matched her eyes, sparkling now from excitement at attending her first dance. Jean marched Frieda over to a chair and held her in her lap, so that Jack could get ready to go to the reception room with them.

Jacqueline Ralston thought little about her own appearance. She probably knew she was pretty. most pretty people are aware of it,

but Jack had really had so much to do and so many things to think about, that she had almost none of the vanities of most girls of sixteen. She coiled her gold-brown braids around her head in simple fashion, though she usually wore them down, as it was so difficult to keep her hair up when she was on horseback. But to-night, in honor of the party, she wished to look more grown up. Jack's hair waved from the roots to the ends and broke out all over her forehead in wayward curls and was particularly becoming to her, arranged in a simple coronet. In five minutes she had on her blue cotton crêpe gown and the three went into Mrs. Simpson's big living-room.

The room had a hardwood floor and had been charmingly decorated with evergreens, which the men had brought in from the woods at the far end of the Simpson Ranch.

"Oh, Jack, Jean, look!" Frieda suddenly gasped. A vision of fashionable loveliness swept before their girlish eyes. Miss Laura Post was crossing the room followed by her mother. Jack and Jean felt like creeping back to their bedroom, not realizing how inappropriate Laura's and her mother's costumes were for such a simple home party.

Laura was a picture and looked as if she had just stepped out of the pages of a magazine. She wore a white lace gown over silk and chiffon, trimmed in silver lace. Her hair was elaborately dressed in a bewildering mass of small, blonde puffs and around her neck a string of pearls shone softly. Mrs. Post was in violet satin, and wore a diamond crescent, which made Frieda's round eyes open wider and wider. She had never seen real diamonds, only their crystal imitations shining in the great Wyoming rocks.

For a little while Jean and Jack felt as dowdy as old rag dolls, but when the dancing began they forgot to care about their clothes. There were a number of other guests besides the house party, who had driven over to the dance, and most of them were friends of the ranch girls.

Frank did not ask Jack to dance nor did he make any effort to talk to her. She had said she could not be friends with him and he did not mean to take advantage of their being at the same house party together, to thrust himself upon her, as his attentions seemed unwelcome.

After supper, Laura Post grew tired of the simple old-fashioned waltz which had enter-

tained her visitors the first of the evening, and insisted that the Spanish waltz was the newest thing in her set, and that she wanted to try it. She managed to get half a dozen young people to attempt it with her while others sat around the wall.

Jean dearly loved to dance, and had no intention of being a wall flower, so she and Harry Pryor slipped out on the big ranch veranda to talk. It was a wonderful moonlight night, as clear and brilliant as the day, and across the wide stretch of lowlands the moon shimmered and shone, as if reflected on the still surface of the ocean.

Jacqueline Ralston saw Jean and Harry disappear; slowly she followed them and stood for a moment drinking in the wonderful beauty of the Western night, then crossed to Jean and Harry.

"Jean, Harry, wouldn't it be a glorious night for a ride?" she asked breathlessly. "Do you think it would be wrong if we should go for a little run across the prairies? We could easily find the trail, for it is as bright as daytime."

Jean clapped her hands softly. "Bully!" Harry announced quietly. "It is not ten

o'clock yet and we can be back long before the dance breaks up. I'll go saddle the ponies while you girls slip into your riding togs."

"Be sure to get Hotspur and Frisk, Jean's pony," Jack entreated. "Jim sent over our own ponies from the ranch, and I simply hate to ride any horse but dear little Hotspur."

Just as Jean and Jack slipped into the front hall to go to their room, Frank Kent stepped out on the porch. He was looking pale and ill, for the heat of the room and the effort of dancing had brought the old weakness back on him that he had felt only a few times since his coming to Wyoming.

Jack felt a sudden wave of sympathy and friendliness. She touched Frank lightly on the arm: "My cousin and I and Harry Pryor are going to steal away from the dance for a little horseback ride. Would you care to come with us?" she asked.

Frank's face lost most of its pallor. He immediately insisted that the one thing in the world he most wished to do was to take a moonlight ride across the prairies.

Ten minutes later the two girls and two boys cantered away from the Simpson ranch. They had no thought of staying out long, and

had left word with Mrs. Simpson's maid that they would be back in about an hour. Aunt Sallie was too busy with her other guests to be interrupted, and it never dawned on the girls that they should not have gone for a ride at night, for they were just like a couple of careless boys.

CHAPTER IX.

JACQUELINE'S MISFORTUNE.

TO one side of Mr. Simpson's big ranch lay a new orchard. The ranch people in Wyoming were just beginning to discover what wonderful fruit could be grown in certain portions of their cattle country and Jean and Jack were dreadfully envious of their neighbor's five acres of pears, plums, apples and cherries. Their own poor orchard had been set out only two years before and the trees appeared like a collection of feeble switches.

"Let's ride through the orchard and fill our pockets with apples before we start on our way," Harry suggested. The moonlight was so clear and radiant that the boys could distinguish the color of the few late apples that still hung on the trees. The road back of the orchard led to a trail across the prairies, which neither the ranch girls nor Harry knew. It seemed to travel to the land of nowhere across a shining path of light.

Jacqueline took the lead, followed by Frank

Kent, Jean and Harry. The ponies had been all day in the corrals and some of the witchery of the October night had gotten into them as well as their riders. They galloped swiftly, their shaggy manes shaking and their long tails arched, and soon left the level lands of their host's ranch far behind.

"I never had such a wonderful ride in my life!" Frank Kent exclaimed. "How utterly still the night is!"

Jack's hands hardly touched her reins and she laughed joyously. "Oh, that is because we are out on the prairie and going too swiftly for you to hear. Over there where we see a line of shadow, I believe we will find some water and a grove of trees. Then you will hear the noises of the night, which are part of our Western life."

Jack and Frank slowed down. Jean and Harry were a short distance behind them. They had ridden to the edge of a ravine, and across the gorge was a solitary butte or low mountain. On this side the moonlight fell on a stretch of evergreen forest, whose tall trees rose black between the splashes of light.

"Listen," Jack whispered softly.

First came the mournful call of the wildcats

from the depth of the ravine, then, near the entrance to the woods, the whimper and squeak of the owls.

Frank caught a sound which the last few weeks in Wyoming had taught him to understand, the long melancholy wail of the coyotes, the wolf dogs of the prairies. But to-night the howl was deeper and more prolonged.

"What was that?" Frank asked quickly.

"Wolves, I suppose," Jack answered with perfect calmness. "There may be a few of them prowling about. They often come out at night at some distance from the ranches."

Jean and Harry cantered up. "Hasn't the ride been just too beautiful?" Jean sighed. "I can't bear to think we must turn back to go home."

"Home? Why it's not late," Harry argued, but Jean shook her head.

"We have got to try the forest trail for just a little bit of the way, Jean," Jack pleaded recklessly. "We won't go far in. It will be like fairyland in there to-night. See how plain the trail is, there must be water somewhere and the trail was made by the deer and antelope on the way to the pool to drink.

To-night I shan't believe that anybody knows of these woods but us."

Jack did not wait for an answer. She would not listen to Jean's remonstrance, for all the willfulness in her was aroused and she thought only of her own desire.

She turned Hotspur's head into the woods. There was no chance to ride beside her, as the way was too narrow, so the rest of the party followed in single file.

"You ought to have let me go on ahead, Jack," Harry declared in a worried tone. "You know nothing of this trail and you may come to grief!"

Jacqueline laughed teasingly. "Don't be preachy, Harry. You know Hotspur and I are used to looking after ourselves." Jack whistled like a naughty boy:

"On the road to Mandalay,
Where the flying fishes play,"—

and waved her hand to the others to follow her at a sharper pace.

"Jack's awfully silly to-night," Jean remarked to Frank Kent. "I hope Aunt Sallie won't mind, but there is nothing for us to do but to keep up with her. We won't get back to the ranch until awfully late."

Frank hesitated. "Look here, Miss Bruce, I know I am a tenderfoot, but do you think we ought to go into these woods at night? Don't think, please, that I am afraid for myself. But Miss Ralston just told me that there might be wolves about. I am not armed, though I believe that Harry has his pistol. I should hate to have you get in trouble."

Jean understood Frank Kent better than Jacqueline did. To tell the truth, he seemed a bit slow to Jack, she liked people with more get up and go, more fire and energy in them. But Jean guessed that Frank had plenty of strength and courage beneath his quiet manner, and Jean was right.

"Wolves don't attack parties, not once in a thousand times," Jean explained simply. "And we are making entirely too much noise to be in any danger. It is the solitary individual the wolves like to get after. They are such mean cowardly wretches."

Frank Kent smiled grimly. The ranch girls were a puzzle to him, they talked about wolves and bears and wild cattle as calmly as most girls spoke of dogs and cats and canary birds, and Frank could see that they were not putting on airs. They would not

have gone deliberately into danger any more than a sensible fellow would have done; but Jean and Jack had grown up in a country where men had lived by the killing of wild game. Their house was filled with the skins of wild animals, shot by their father and the cowboys from their place. While they were still little children they had been taught the use of a gun. Jack often had been on hunting trips with her father in the northern parts of the State and was perfectly able to bring down a lynx or a cougar with a well-trained shot between its eyes. She had never been able to shoot a deer, for in spite of being brought up like a boy, her heart failed her at the thought of destroying anything that did not live by preying on other animals.

Jack gave a cry of pleasure. "See!" she called back. "I haven't brought you to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but I have led you to a pool of silver." She had brought Hotspur to a standstill in front of a little silver lake, where the ravine extended in a circle into the woods.

For a moment the four riders were breathless with admiration, then a big brown form lumbered out of a clump of low bushes.

Hotspur reared and the indistinct mass rolled by Jacqueline and made for a thicket.

"It's a bear!" Jack shouted triumphantly. "Who would have thought we could have had such luck? Let's go after old Bruin and see what becomes of him; he won't eat us up."

Jack was only joking. She had no real idea of following the bear; she wasn't even sure what beast had trundled by them, but was only in a wild humor and wondered how far the others would follow her. She gave Hotspur a little cut with her whip.

"Come back, Miss Ralston," Frank called sharply. He had ridden near enough to her to reach out for her bridle.

Jack grew more reckless. She sprang aside but did not notice that the ground opened in front of her in a narrow, broken crevice, until Hotspur's fore feet went down the incline and Jack pitched headlong over him, falling with a crash in the brushwood beyond.

In the medley of cries and confusion that followed, Jacqueline did not know whether she had been unconscious a second or an age when she was aroused by a peculiar noise which she was familiar with. It was a horse's terrible cry of pain. She tried to sit up.

Jean and Frank Kent had dismounted hurriedly and come over to her, while Harry Pryor was trying to get Hotspur out of the gully.

"I am afraid you will have to help me, Frank, if Miss Ralston isn't hurt; I am afraid Hotspur has broken his leg."

Jacqueline gave a little cry and Jean covered her cousin's eyes with her hands. There was a pain in Jack's shoulder that was wrenching and tearing at her, but it was nothing to the feeling that Harry's words created.

"It can't be true," she sobbed. "I couldn't have hurt my pony like that."

But it was true, for Harry and Frank had Hotspur on the level ground and the little pony lay moaning and neighing pitifully. There was only moonlight to show what had happened, but Jack flung herself down beside him and her tears fell in his shaggy mane. "What can we do?" she begged. "Doesn't any one know how to set a pony's leg?"

Harry shook his head. "You know it's hopeless, Jack. There is but one thing to do for Hotspur. I can ride back to the ranch

for help, but it would only prolong his pain."

"You mean you must shoot him, don't you, Harry?" Jack asked.

Jean and Frank both turned away their heads. Even in the moonlight, they could see that Jack's face was ghastly white and her lips almost blue. Only Jean knew how much Jacqueline cared for her pony; he had been her father's gift and for the past three years Jack had hardly ever ridden any other horse, unless Hotspur were too weary to carry her. The thought that her own heedlessness and obstinacy had brought the disaster only made it the harder to bear.

Harry nodded. "It's the only way, Jack, you know."

"All right," Jack answered briefly. "Be quick."

Jean's tears were blinding her but Jack looked straight ahead.

"Take the girls toward home with you, Frank," Harry suggested. "I'll come afterwards."

"I would rather wait until it is over," Jack begged. "It is my fault that this has happened and I won't go away like a coward,

Hotspur would like to hear my voice until the end." Jack felt her eyes burn and her throat swell as now and then she patted the quivering broncho.

Jean led her cousin a short distance off, but Jack's eyes never left her pony. She saw Harry get out his pistol, load it and point straight at Hotspur. A single shot rang out, a long tremor ran through the horse's body, a single sound like a sigh shook it and Jack's best beloved friend and servant was gone forever.

"Take me back to the ranch, please," she whispered hoarsely, all her courage gone. Harry lifted her on his broncho and for a time walked beside her. Then Frank changed places and Harry rode. For a part of the time, Jack cried silently. She had not mentioned the pain in her arm, although it grew stiffer each moment, but now and then she winced.

"You are hurt, aren't you, Miss Ralston?" Frank questioned. "I was afraid you were all along." But Jack shook her head; she could think of nothing but Hotspur.

Jean, however, was thinking of something else. She remembered that it was after mid-

night and they were not yet back at the Simpson ranch. What would Aunt Sallie and Mr. Simpson say? And what would Laura and Mrs. Post think of them? Jean shivered, for now that the excitement of their trip with its sad ending was over, she realized that she and Jack ought never to have gone off riding alone. Poor Jean's cheeks were hot with blushes, in spite of her shivers. She and Jack had not meant to do anything wrong, still they ought to have known better. Was it because they had no mother that neither of them had thought?

Just before they reached the ranch, Jack turned a white face toward the other truants. "Remember, please, that whatever blame we receive for to-night's ride, the fault is all mine; I proposed the ride, I would go farther when Jean asked me to turn back. Don't anybody say anything different, for you know it is true."

Frank Kent listened silently. He made no reply, but it was hardly his idea that a man should allow a girl to shoulder all the blame for any mistake.

Mrs. Simpson and her husband rushed down from the veranda, and were followed by a

few of Jean's, Jack's and Harry's most intimate friends. Dan Norton was waiting for Frank, with an unpleasant grin on his face. Laura and most of the company had gone to bed, but Laura's mother surveyed the two ranch girls with an expression they had never seen in their free happy girlhood.

"I shall never forgive you children as long as I live," Aunt Sallie exclaimed angrily. "Where in the world have you been? I knew you had been left to your own devices, Jean and Jack, but I did think you had more judgment than to ride across the country at this time of the night."

"It was all my fault," Jack repeated humbly. "We meant to go for just a short ride and I didn't think you would care, but we went farther and farther and Hotspur broke his leg, so we had to come back with just the three horses. Jean did want to turn back sooner, Aunt Sallie," Jack whispered. They were now inside the ranch house, under the lights of the lamps. "Please don't scold her. I know I did very wrong and I'm sorry; won't you please let me explain better in the morning?"

And then Jack saw everything slipping

away from her and the place grew horribly dark. Big Mr. Simpson caught her in his arms.

"There, Sallie, don't scold any more to-night," he ordered. "The child is worn out. She did wrong, of course, but I expect she has been punished enough by losing her pony. It's the boys who are most to blame, I'll warrant you. Of course they led the girls on this wild goose chase."

Harry and Frank Kent eagerly bowed their heads. "I didn't think you would believe any such nonsense as Miss Ralston has been telling you," Frank avowed. "Of course Mr. Pryor and I are responsible for the ride and everything that occurred," he ended, with more gallantry than truth.

Aunt Sallie might have kept up her scolding all night, for she was a good-hearted woman with a very high temper, adored by her successful husband and accustomed to having her own way, but she saw that Jack was in pain. There was something in the girl's white face with the dark circles under her eyes and the look of penitence and pain instead of her usual almost haughty expression, that touched her.

"Come to bed, child," she said suddenly. She caught Jack's arm. For the first time, the girl gave a cry of pain at her own hurt. "I think I have sprained my shoulder a little, Aunt Sallie," she explained quietly. "I will be all right in the morning."

It was another hour before Mrs. Simpson got Jack's shoulder properly bandaged and had her stored away in bed. Fortunately, the shoulder was only sprained, not broken. Yet Jack could not sleep; it was not alone the pain that kept her awake, but the realization that she and Jean were no longer little girls and could not do what they liked without a thought. It was she who had led Jean into mischief, yet try as she might, she could not bear the whole burden of the wrongdoing, and she wished to-night, that the ranch girls had some one to look after them, some older woman.

CHAPTER X.

BACK TO RAINBOW LODGE.

“**A**UNT SALLIE, if you don’t mind,” said Jacqueline next day, “I think we had better go back to Rainbow Lodge.”

Jack’s arm and shoulder were swathed in white cotton and she had none of her usual color, but she was out on the veranda and insisted that she was not suffering in the least.

“Nonsense, Jack,” Mrs Simpson returned kindly. “You are not angry at the scolding I gave you last night, are you? You know you deserved it, but of course you and Jean were only thoughtless. We have forgotten all about it to-day.”

Jack looked away. “Everybody hasn’t forgotten, Aunt Sallie, but I am not running away because of that. I had a note from Jim this morning and I think he needs me at the ranch.”

Mrs. Simpson flushed. “I know you are referring to my niece and sister, Jack, but you must remember that Mrs. Post and Laura have lived always in the East. Laura has

been very carefully brought up and they are not accustomed to our Western ways of looking at things. But I am sure that if you show them you are sorry, they will forgive you in course of time."

Jack's face was no longer pale, she was crimson with anger. If there was one thing in the world which she had no intention of doing, it was to show penitence for her conduct to Laura Post or her mother. It seemed to Jack that to treat a guest in the fashion that Miss Post had treated her and Jean and to be malicious and vain and small-minded, was a good deal worse than to have committed the thoughtless act that she and Jean had been guilty of. But for the sake of Mrs. Simpson, Jacqueline for the moment held her peace. She hoped she would be able to hold it until she got away from the Simpson ranch, but was by no means sure.

Olive and Frieda were out in the yard walking quietly up and down. Frieda was chattering like a magpie, but the Indian girl was silent and rarely lifted her eyes. Frieda waved to Jack and the two girls started toward her and Mrs. Simpson, but at this moment, Laura Post and Dan

came out of the front door of the ranch house.

Jack saw Laura stop and say something to the Indian girl. Olive turned quickly and with her head drooping went directly into the house.

Sturdy little Frieda stood stock still and then raised a pair of indignant blue eyes to Laura. "I don't believe you!" she exclaimed hotly, "I am going to ask Jack."

Frieda rushed across the porch, her eyes streaming with tears and flung herself into Jacqueline's arms, Dan Norton and Laura following her more slowly.

Neither Olive nor Frieda had been told anything of Mrs. Simpson's plan to keep Olive at her ranch as a maid for her niece. There had not been time to discuss it and Mrs. Simpson had been too busy that morning to talk to the Indian girl, but regarded the matter as having been entirely settled with the ranch girls.

"Oh, please, Jack," Frieda cried, her voice trembling, "Laura Post just told Olive to go into the house at once. She said that as long as Olive was to be her maid, she did not wish her to be out in the front with her guests.

It wasn't true, was it? She is coming back home with us, isn't she?"

Jack made no reply. She only looked at Laura Post with a pair of clear, wide open, grey eyes that held more than a touch of scorn in them.

For once, Mrs. Simpson appeared slightly displeased with her adored niece. "Laura," she remarked disapprovingly, "I am sorry you spoke in that way to the Indian girl. Remember I asked her here as your guest. I have not had time to explain to her that she is to remain as your maid."

"What on earth is all this pow-wow about?" Jean demanded, appearing suddenly on the scene, swinging a tennis racquet and followed by Harry, who was usually her shadow. "You look as tragic as the tale of Solomon Grundy. 'Died on Saturday, buried on Sunday, this was the end of Solomon Grundy,'" Jean chanted in mournful tones. "Who are you trying to get rid of, at present?"

"No one, Jean," Mrs. Simpson replied. "I was only speaking to Laura of the Indian girl's remaining here as her maid. I will go now and tell the girl about it myself."

Jean caught hold of Aunt Sallie's ample

skirts. "Not so quickly, please, Aunt Sallie," she urged, while she looked pleadingly at Jack. "We are not sure that we can give up Olive to you. You must not be angry, for you know we did find her first and we have the first right to her."

"But I have got to have some one to wait on me," Laura broke in pettishly. "I can't button my own shoes and comb my hair, and Auntie promised me this girl for my maid."

"Never mind, dear," Mrs. Simpson returned soothingly. "It is all settled, Jean and Jack can't possibly be so foolish as to attempt to keep this girl at Rainbow Lodge."

"Oh, yes, we can, Aunt Sallie," Jack answered, sweetly but firmly. "I have been wanting to talk to you alone, but I haven't had a chance. I have thought things all over and though we do not wish Olive for a servant at Rainbow Lodge, we do want her for another ranch girl!" You could have heard a pin drop as Jacqueline went on. "You see we have plenty of room in our home and I am sure that four girls ought to be even happier together than just three. If Olive will trust herself with us, we shall try to do the best that we can for her. I hope some day, for

her sake, we may find out who she really is, but if not, why perhaps she may be willing to be known as one of us."

Jack looked so proud and at the same time so generous and fine that Frank Kent, who was standing near enough to overhear her, wanted to shout with delight, but managed to appear perfectly indifferent, though Laura did think she heard him say "Ripping!" under his breath.

Mrs. Simpson was crimson with vexation. "Very well, Jack Ralston, do as you like," she replied coldly. "Understand I wash my hands of the whole affair. You will live to regret this piece of Quixotic foolishness and when this Indian girl gets you into trouble, don't come to me."

"We won't, Aunt Sallie," Jacqueline returned gently. "And I hope you won't think we are ungrateful to you. We saw lots of real Indian girls at the village yesterday, perhaps Miss Post will have one of them as her maid. I'll ask Olive to recommend one."

Jack walked quietly away from the group on the veranda, holding Frieda by the hand while Jean murmured more apologies to Aunt Sallie, being as careful as possible not to look

that lady in the face. Miss Bruce hardly wished Mrs. Simpson to see how her brown eyes were dancing with pleasure and pride, but when Aunt Sallie had gone away, Jean made no effort to conceal her satisfaction from Laura Post and Dan Norton.

Jacqueline marched straight in to find Olive. She was not in her room. She was not in the maids' room, nor in the big kitchen. Hong Su, Mrs. Simpson's Chinese cook, explained that the 'Lil Mlissie' had gone out in the back yard.

To one side and behind the Simpson ranch house was a large kitchen garden, at only a short distance from the house itself.

Jack and Frieda could not find Olive at once. There was nothing to hide her and she could not have gone down to the stables that were some distance away, yet she was nowhere in sight.

Half an acre of Indian corn was ripening and yellowing in the sun. It rustled and its long dried leaves crackled and swayed, and they soon saw the Indian girl walking through it with her head bent and tears falling fast. Straightway Jacqueline thought of the Song of Hiawatha and the Indian legend of the

corn. Poor little Olive was the Minnehaha, after her laughter had been stilled! Frieda ran straight to her friend and threw her arms around her. "Oh, Olive, it isn't true," she cried. "You are to come home with us to Rainbow Lodge."

But Olive shook her head. She could not understand.

Jacqueline took the girl's slender, brown hand. "Olive," she asked gently, "do you think you could be happy if you came to live with us at the ranch? I am dreadfully cross sometimes and you may not like me, but Frieda and Jean are dears. We are only girls like you and perhaps we may make mistakes, but you won't mind, if we all do our best together."

Jacqueline was frightened at the expression of the Indian girl's face. "You want me to live with you like one of you?" she gasped. "Oh, it can't, it can't be true."

"But it can be true, Olilie," Jack answered lightly, using the girl's pretty Indian name. "And there is nothing so remarkable in our wanting to have you. Suppose when mother and father came out here to Wyoming from the East, something had happened to them

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and they had left me somewhere for a stranger to find me. Then the same thing might have happened to me that has happened to you, and I am sure you would have come along and rescued me if you could."

"Then you don't think I am an Indian girl?" Olive questioned eagerly.

Jack hesitated. "I don't know, Olive, I'm sure," she returned. "Of course I was only talking. Come, let's pack up our things, I think we will go home to-morrow."

"But if Laska and Josef come back for me?" Olive pleaded, unable to believe in her wonderful good fortune.

Jacqueline's face sobered. She was thinking of what Jim Colter would say when he learned of their adoption of Olive. She knew that Jim was troubled about something; had the ranch girls any right to offer a home to any one when their own future was so uncertain?

But Jack's lips closed firmly. "Never mind, Olive," she answered. "We won't worry over things until they happen, when they do we will face them the best we can."

Rainbow Lodge had never looked more dear and homelike than it did when the four ranch girls arrived before its open front door.

Jim had sent one of the cowboys to drive them home and Jack wondered why he had not come himself. But she forgot to ask what had kept him, when she saw Aunt Ellen's smiling face and smelt the odor of ginger cookies coming from the kitchen back of her.

"Isn't it great to be at home, children?" Jack exclaimed triumphantly. But Frieda had flown to look after her chickens and Jean was shaking hands with old Zack, who was building the frames over her violet beds.

"This bandage is cutting my arm off, Olive," Jack went on, noticing Olive's wistful face as Jack said the word "home." "Won't you come in and fix it for me, please? I am going to make you and Jean and Frieda wait on me all I can, now we are away from Aunt Sallie's. Of course I had to pretend my arm didn't hurt over there, because I knew that that abominable Laura Post and Dan Norton would say 'serves her right,' every time I had a twinge of pain."

Jack was talking nonsense to keep Olive from thinking and as the two girls passed under the arch of the door, Jack kissed her lightly. "Good luck to Ranch Girl Number Four. May you live long and prosper at Rainbow Lodge," she whispered.

CHAPTER XI.

BREAKING THE NEWS.

JEAN and Jack came down the wide sunlit hall with their two heads close together. It was three days since their return from the house party to their own home.

Outside a half-opened door they stopped. "Listen, Jack," Jean whispered, swallowing a giggle. "They have been doing it every single day."

"If three fifths of a number is fifteen, what is the number?" Frieda's voice read slowly and solemnly. She paused for a long moment. "The number is fifteen, isn't it Olive? The sum said so."

Jean would not have swallowed her giggle this time, except that Jack pinched her on the arm. "Do be quiet, Jean," she entreated. "You will hurt their feelings."

"No, Frieda," Olive explained patiently. "You see one fifth of fifteen is five—"

Jack knocked lightly on the door. "May we interrupt the school a minute, please?" she begged. "I have to go away in a little

while with Jim and I do want to see what is going on. I think it is perfectly sweet of you, Olive, to be trying to teach Frieda. It makes Jean and me awfully ashamed."

Olive laughed shyly: "Oh, I am not teaching," she answered, "Frieda and I are just studying together. There are such a lot of things I ought to know so you won't be ashamed of me, and I am trying to learn the few that I can. Frieda likes to study too."

Frieda was chewing the end of her stubby pencil and making queer figures on a crumpled piece of paper. Her little round face wore such a virtuous and studious expression that Jack laughed. Jean went over and pulling Frieda's hair said: "Since when, Frieda Ralston, have you developed into a student? Far be it from you ever to get your lessons for *me* without a fuss; something must have come over the spirit of your dreams."

Frieda shook her head impatiently. She was a very matter-of-fact person at all times. "No such thing, Jean, dreams haven't anything to do with it, it is only that Olive really takes an interest herself and is awfully patient and does not laugh—"

But Jean had put her fingers in her ears and slipped out the bedroom door.

Olive and Frieda were in their own room at a small table drawn up near the window, and looking out, Jack saw Jim Colter come up the drive to the door on horseback, leading a horse for her. Jean ran out in the yard and stood for a moment talking to him.

Jim had been away from Rainbow Ranch since the day of the girls' return, and Jack could see that he looked tired and serious, not like his usual self.

Jack kissed Frieda. "Perhaps Jim and I won't be back until late, little sister, don't worry. You know we are going to ride along the side of Rainbow Creek to see about some of the cattle and horses. Maybe the poor ponies and calves haven't any water to drink in some parts of the ranch. Don't study until your pigtails turn grey."

Frieda laughed, but the Indian girl looked at Jacqueline closely. There was something odd in Jack's manner, as though she were trying to hide a secret that she was not sure whether or not she wished to tell.

"Good-bye, Olive," Jack called lightly, "don't talk about our being ashamed of you,

child. If you knew all I do not know, you would be quite the wisest person in the world. Maybe Jean and I will have news for you tonight. You have got to think it is good news, for Jean and I hope it is. Anyhow, you two good, industrious children have made me make up my feeble mind. *Auf wiedersehen.* That being about all the German I know, I will translate it for you: 'Till we meet again.'"

Jack stamped out on the porch to Jean and Jim.

"Morning, overseer," she said brightly.

Jim lifted his Mexican hat. "Morning, boss," he returned gravely. "How is the wounded member?"

Jack shrugged her sprained shoulder the least little bit. "It's not first class yet, pard," she stammered, mimicking one of the cowboys on the ranch. "But I think I can get over a good piece of ground by catching hold on the reins with this here one good arm, if it's the same to you. Is that the horse you mean me to use now, Jim?" Jack asked, her voice and manner changing.

"Best I can do at present," Jim replied soberly. "Tricks ain't up to Hotspur and you may have to watch him a bit."

"Jean," Jack whispered, just before she mounted her horse. "We have made up our minds to it, haven't we? Do you think we will be able to endure it?"

Jean cast her brown eyes up to heaven. "Bear it?" she groaned. "Well I suppose if we must, we must. Only tell Jim, maybe he will say we must not, then think of the relief!" Jean sighed, half in fun and half in earnest, and watched Jim and Jack scamper out of sight.

"Wonder what old Jim and Jack are up to?" she murmured. "If they only were going to see how nearly dry Rainbow Creek is, they would have taken one of the cowboys with them. They are sure to have to pull a cow or a calf out of a mud hole, before they are through. Jim looks as sober as a judge. I hope he hasn't heard anything about the—" Jean broke off her musing, with a stamp of her foot. "Of course not, I am a goose to think of it," she told herself sternly.

Jim Colter and Jack galloped on in silence, Jim riding high in his saddle, standing nearly erect, with his feet well out in the Western cowboy fashion. He wore a pair of fringed trousers, with a cartridge belt around his

waist and two big Colt's revolvers were stuck in the holsters on either side. A forty-foot rope was coiled and hung at the pommel of his saddle. Jim's Irish blue eyes were black with anger this morning and his lips set in a firm, hard line.

The two riders had followed the bed of Rainbow Creek for two miles through the ranch before either one of them spoke.

Jim wheeled and looked Jack straight in the eyes. "You have a piece of news for me, haven't you, Jack?" he asked.

Jack nodded. "My news will keep. What is it you have to tell me? I know it is important."

"Can you bear it, girl?" Jim asked abruptly. "It's pretty bad."

Jack lifted her eyes without speaking. A moment later they filled with tears and her lips trembled. "It isn't true though, Jim, is it?" she entreated. "He can't prove what isn't true."

Jim squared his shoulders. "That is just the point, Miss Jack, and what we have got to fight. Daniel Norton says he can prove that he is the rightful owner of Rainbow Ranch. He has papers to show it and we haven't a

sign of anything. What we have got to establish is that his claim is a lie and that Rainbow Ranch don't belong to nobody on this earth but John Ralston's daughters."

"But how, Jim?" Jack asked. "You know we have lost the title to the estate. We have never been able to find a sign of a paper to show that the ranch is our property. I have looked through every one of father's papers a thousand times. The deed is gone!"

"Then it will have to return before January first," Jim answered coolly, snapping his fingers in the wind. "That is the date Mr. Norton means to bring suit. Remember the game we used to play with a bit of paper, when you were a little girl, Jack, 'Fly away Peter, Come back Paul'? Paul used to come back, so don't you be frightened. Daniel Norton hasn't gotten our ranch from us yet, and before he does, he will see some pretty tall scrapping. But I am afraid we have got to find our deed. I was one of the witnesses when your father's title to this ranch was drawn up. The other witness was a fellow from the East, who just happened to be passing through the country. He stayed with us a few days and then goodness only knows what became of him. He

may be living in New York or New Mexico for all I know."

"But you can advertise for him, can't you, Jim?" Jack pleaded, her face looking white and drawn. "Maybe if he would swear that father bought our ranch and that Mr. Norton couldn't have any right to it, it might do some good. What was his name?"

"Will Corbin," Jim answered shortly. "But don't build your hopes on that idea. I have been advertising for the fellow for months. Not a word from him."

"But the court records," Jack continued. "Of course I don't know anything about law or business, Jim, but I am sure that I have heard that if a person buys or sells a piece of property, some kind of record of it is kept in a big book. Can't you get hold of that?" Jack begged faintly. "If Mr. Norton brings suit and makes us leave our ranch in January, what can we do? Where will we go? It will be so hard for Frieda and Jean." Jack choked and could not go on for a moment.

Jim was looking in every direction except at his companion and cleared his throat once or twice. Jack was gazing out over the sweep of low country bordered by the distant hills. To

one side was an open field, where a herd of wild horses was munching the dried buffalo grass; on the wooded slope of the ravine on the further bank of the creek, cattle were leading their calves to drink. It was all their own, hers and Jean's and Frieda's; their beloved Rainbow Ranch! Jack could recall no fairer picture than the scene before her. Her eyes had looked out only on the western lands since she could remember. "Well, Jim, don't you think it would be a good scheme for us to look up this court record?" Jack inquired more hopefully. "Mr. Norton couldn't say it was false."

"Look here, Jacqueline Ralston," Jim answered more gruffly than he had ever spoken to her before. "Do you think that you are the only member of Rainbow Ranch who has any business head? What have I been doing these last few days but looking up that very record of the sale of Rainbow Ranch to John Ralston, Esq.? But I have wasted my time. It wasn't any use. The court record is gone, same as our own deed."

"But that isn't possible, Jim," Jack argued faintly, feeling the world begin to spin round faster and faster, so she could hardly sit on

her horse. "I thought nobody ever dared touch anything that belonged to a court of law."

"Jack," Jim demanded severely, "will you kindly remember that we are living in the State of Wyoming and that we haven't been a State but a powerful few years? When your father first came to Wyoming, this country was pretty well filled up with wild beasts, wild Indians and some pretty wild white men. There weren't but a few towns and they weren't slow towns either. Things used to go on in them that a girl don't need to know about. One of the tricks the bad men used to play was to change the county seat over night, just for their own convenience. A band of men would ride up to the courthouse, gather up the court records, the law books and anything else that came in handy, and carry them off to a new town. Next morning when folks woke up, they would find the county seat moved and maybe a new judge and a new sheriff. In one of these here little midnight excursions, they must have carried off the court records which showed your father bought our old ranch fair and true. The book must have been lost, for the record has disappeared,

same as our own title to the place. You can kind of see that old man Norton has got us in a tight place, can't you, Jack?" Jim ended gloomily.

"We don't have to tell Jean and Frieda yet, do we, Jim?" Jack pleaded wistfully. "It won't do any good to make them miserable so long as we can keep the news from them."

Jim shook his head. "No sense in your bearing the whole burden alone, Jack. You ain't much older than Jean, you know. Besides, maybe little Frieda will be the very one of us to find our lost title to the old ranch. Ain't things often revealed unto babes that are hid from the rest of us?" Jim quoted reverently, not remembering exactly the great words of the text, but sure enough of its meaning.

"Wait here a minute for me, please, Jack," Jim remarked suddenly, "there is one of our calves stuck in the mud in the creek bottom. Funny how the farther we get away from the Lodge the slower our creek runs! It didn't used to be that way. Ought to be five or six feet of water along here and there's only about one, and that silly calf has sunk to her knees in mud and slime."

Jim rode away from Jack, a few feet into the creek, feeling his way cautiously for fear of quicksands. The calf bleated and struggled, but with a skillful swing of his lasso, Jim caught the mired animal securely and dragged her back safe to dry land. When he joined Jack again, the worried expression had disappeared entirely from his face.

"Cheer up, pard," he resumed affectionately. "You have got the best head on your shoulders of any girl on this side the great divide. We will straighten things out some way and have one of the jolliest Christmases that ever took place at Rainbow Lodge, as a celebration. But didn't you and Jean have something on your minds that you meant to ask me about? Out with it! We don't want to do any talking when we get along toward the end of our creek. Sure as fate, some way the water is being drained from our creek and I have got to find out how it's done."

"Oh, my news doesn't amount to anything now, Jim," Jacqueline announced "After what you have just told me, there wouldn't be any point in trying to carry out our plan. Indeed it is entirely out of the question."

"Tell me the plan just the same, Jack," Jim insisted, anxious to get Jack's mind off the subject of their troubles.

"You will be awfully surprised, Jim," Jack declared, her face crimsoning, "but Jean and I had just about decided that we ought to have a chaperon to come to live with us at Rainbow Lodge."

Jim gave a long drawn out whistle. He gazed meditatively up at the blue sky. "Good thing it ain't night," he replied slowly, "because if it had been, the stars would have fallen at that remark of yours. You and Jean think you ought to have a chaperon! Well, my word!"

"Don't be silly, Jim," Jack remonstrated. "You know we have talked over our having a chaperon at the Lodge dozens of times since father died. And even when I haven't talked, I have been thinking. We did hate the idea of one and I am afraid I do still. But since our visit to Aunt Sallie," Jack's beautiful straightforward face colored hotly, "Jean and I believe we ought to have an older woman to live with us. You see it is this way, Jim; we don't want to do things that even look wrong, just because we don't know

any better; and then we don't want to grow up into perfect dunces. Jean and I don't seem to study at all with no one to teach us, and Olive and Frieda are so anxious to learn that they make us ashamed." Jack sighed. "What's the use of telling you all this? Of course we can't think of sending for a chaperon now when we do not know how long we will have a home to live in ourselves."

Jack had been crying a little, but now she threw her head back with a familiar gesture and winked bravely. "Let's don't talk about our troubles any more, Jim. Mr. Norton hasn't taken possession of Rainbow Ranch yet by any means. Who knows what may happen in two months?"

"Shall I go to Laramie to-morrow and order out a chaperon, Miss Ralston?" Jim queried calmly. "Suppose I put an ad in the paper. 'Wanted: a long-suffering lady, who knows everything, to chaperon and instruct four young ladies who know nothing, but have difficult and unmanageable tempers, particularly the eldest.' Sounds an attractive advertisement. Ought to get a lot of answers."

Jack gazed inquiringly at their devoted friend and counsellor.

"You mean, Jim, that you think we had better go on and have a chaperon, just as we planned, as though there was no danger of our losing the ranch?"

Jim nodded silently. He placed a cautious finger on his lips. He was leaning forward in his saddle, intent on something ahead.

Jack did not notice. "We don't want to have any one to live with us whom we know nothing about," she went on, "so I expect we had better send for mother's cousin, Ruth Drew. She is a fussy New England old maid, and terribly prim, but she wrote she would come out to us, and if she can stand for us, why,—what was that, Jim?" Jack finished breathlessly.

"Shsh!" Jim whispered softly. "Keep perfectly still until we know."

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DIVIDE.

JIM COLTER and Jack had ridden to the lower end of Rainbow Creek, where it widened into a kind of natural reservoir. Some yards beyond it, a line of upright rails divided the Ralston ranch from that of the Nortons. The earth dipped slightly on the farther side and a thicket of low sage brush covered the rise in the land beyond.

Jim and Jack saw nothing moving in the sage brush or beyond it and there was no one in sight. Their impression must have been a mistake, for the only living thing in view was a flock of wild geese which flew over their heads uttering their shrill clamor. Jim sat erect, silent and watchful as an Indian, on the back of his equally motionless pony, his hand shading his eyes.

Jack waited on her horse gazing at the quiet waters of Rainbow Creek. Suddenly there came a low rumble inside the earth, like a note of warning, and then the land began to rise in sandy billows as though wave on wave were

seeking some distant shore. The two horses with their silent riders shook as with the ague; the face of Rainbow Lake shivered, then her waters lashed the shores as though they had been parted asunder, and a moment later receded and began to disappear. It was as if old Father Neptune had deserted his home at the bottom of the sea to play his mighty games in the shallow waters of Rainbow Creek. It seemed as though he had blown a great blast through his sacred horn and caused the water to spurt upward, then had drawn it slowly back into his horn again.

The noise and the movement died away.

"Was it an earthquake, Jim?" Jacqueline managed to murmur, as soon as she could get her breath. She had slipped quietly off her pony and was patting it softly, for the broncho was terribly frightened at the strangeness of his experience.

Jim nodded solemnly. "A human earthquake, I guess. Don't be alarmed, it won't occur again, but get to cover quickly."

Jacqueline Ralston knew as well as though she had been a pioneer woman trained to warfare with the Indians in the early days in the West, what Jim's mysterious words, "get to

cover," meant. She and Jim used to play, long years before, that they were travelers across the plains, being hunted down by bands of roving Indians. This was when Jack was a small, bronze-haired tomboy, riding bare-back over the prairies, swimming with her father in the clear, cold mountain streams, afraid of nothing and of no one, the pride of every cowboy on Rainbow Ranch. Later she had learned the value of hiding in ambush in stalking wild game. But, even if Jack had not understood the importance of Jim's advice, she had been trained to obey instantly the word of a superior officer in the moment of action.

It was not an easy matter to seek shelter with a broncho fourteen and a half hands high in the particular part of the ranch where Jack and Jim happened to be at this moment. There were no trees, no underbush of any kind. The trees that are usually found near the beds of streams in the western country, were on the far side of Rainbow Creek. There was no time to wade across. Jack dropped her reins, hoping her pony would wander quietly away. She bent forward and ran as swiftly and silently as possible toward the straggling

rail fence. Then she lay down in the short brown grass, as motionless as a frightened partridge who tries to make the hunter believe he is a part of the still landscape. Jim Colter crawled after Jack, bringing with him his long rope.

A few minutes later a man's figure rose up from the screen of sage bushes on the Norton ranch and the sun glinted on a bright red head. The boy swung his hat in the air once, twice, three times. Then he repeated the signal.

Jim crept through the fence like an eel. Without making the least sound that could be heard by the fellow, whose back was turned to him, Jim got within thirty feet of his enemy.

Jack wondered what on the face of the earth Jim intended to do. Then her eyes widened with surprise and with laughter. There was a swish, a streak through the air, as Jim's lariat uncoiled. Hearing the noise the boy turned and the rope caught him around the waist, pinning his arms securely to his side. He was lassoed as safely as any wild pony.

Jim then calmly started to walk back toward the rail fence that divided the two ranches. He seemed blissfully indifferent to

the fact that he dragged an angry and sputtering young man at the end of his rope. Dan Norton, Jr., was a heavy, stocky fellow, with a good deal of brute strength, but Jim Colter was long and lean, with muscles of steel. Besides, as Dan threw his resisting strength against that of his opponent, the rope tightened about him and cut more deeply into his flesh. He kicked viciously like an unruly colt, but Jim did not condescend to look behind him; his victim was kicking nothing but air, as Jim was ten yards in front.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?" Dan shouted, almost choking with rage.

Jack rose up from behind the shield of the fence. The sight of Jim and his prize was too beautiful, and Jack felt that she was being repaid for many of the cruel tricks that Dan and his father had played on her since she was a little girl. She recalled the time that Dan had nearly put out her eyes, when she was only four years old. She had been playing with him and when she lifted her face to his in answer to some question, he had thrown a great box of sand straight into her wide-open eyes. It was curious how well Jack remembered the deed at this moment.

"Let me go, I'll have you in jail for this. What do you mean by trespassing on my land?" Dan yelled.

Jim laughed and drew Dan closer to him. "Don't get so upset, sonnie, I am not going to trespass on your land," he urged quietly. "This rope is just a little scheme of mine to make you cross the great divide between your ranch and ours, while we talk a few things over." Jim hauled Dan through an opening in the fence.

Jack dared not look straight at them. She did feel it would be too hateful of her to laugh out loud, yet how could she help it? Dan was so desperately angry that it made him fume and fuss and jump about like an excited rooster, and his red head did suggest a rooster's comb.

"Look out, Jim," Jack sang out. "Here come the men Dan was signaling."

Across one of the Norton fields, with their gaze centered on the clump of sage where they expected to find their young master, marched three cowboys from the Norton ranch.

"Come here," Dan shouted, trying in vain to loosen one of his hands to wave to his men.

Jim slipped one of his Colts out of its

holster and passed it over to Jack. "Just keep this for me, will you, Miss Ralston?" he asked politely. There won't be any use for it, but there is no harm in having it handy."

Jim spoke to the puzzled ranchmen and greeted them calmly. "Come as far as you like on your own side of the fence," he said, "but kindly stop right there. I have a few questions I would like to ask Mr. Daniel Norton, Jr., and I wouldn't object to some witnesses. Needn't be afraid, the earthquake is all over. Mr. Norton and I are going to talk quite neighborly and friendly like, as soon as he cools off a bit."

Jim Colter spoke so quietly that the men who watched him knew he meant business. You see Jim's reputation was that he was one of the most dangerous men in the country when he was aroused, and there was no doubt of his present feeling.

The three men nodded respectfully. They did not wish to have a fight, for if they attacked Jim and tried to get Dan Norton away from him, he would undoubtedly use his pistol, and then there was Jacqueline.

The cowboys jerked their heads at Jack in

a greeting intended to be exceedingly polite. Jack understood and returned the men's bows with her best smile. She did not desire to let Jim make the affair with Dan too serious if she could help it, but she had rarely seen their overseer so deeply angry in her life.

An Eastern girl and most Western ones would have been horrified at Jacqueline Ralston's present position. She was standing, a quiet and attentive listener, in a group of five uncultured men. One of the cowboys was Josef, the Indian Laska's son, the other a Mexican, and but one of the three an American. They were all angry and lawless and only one of the five her friend, yet Jacqueline did not think of her position as unusual. She was far too much interested in what was about to take place to think of herself at all and knew that not one of the cowboys would touch her and she was not in the least in fear of Dan. Jacqueline Ralston was not like a girl with a father and mother to care for her. She had been brought up with the ideas of a pioneer woman and was trying to run a ranch and to make a living for herself, her cousin and sister, and if there was any danger that threatened their property or them, she must know

what it was and must do what she could to prevent it. Jack was leaning on a rail of the fence. Her hat had fallen on the ground and her face was white, yet it held a look of quiet power and strength remarkable in a girl so young.

Jim was aggravatingly slow. He was facing Dan Norton while the cowboys hung over the pickets. Dan had ceased to struggle, but still refused to look either at Jim or Jack.

"Our little talk ain't going to take but a few minutes, sonnie, if you will answer my questions straight from the shoulder," Jim drawled. "Did any of you feel a bit of a shock, say like an earthquake, a few minutes back? It 'peared like the ground near Rainbow Creek had gotten tired of not being heard from for some time past and had suddenly swelled up and bust."

Jim pointed toward the lake only a few yards from them. Jack was startled to see how much lower the water was. Could it have fallen an inch in such a little while?

Dan shook his head scornfully. "Earthquake! No, you are off your base," he sputtered. "That is, at least I did feel a slight motion, but it didn't amount to much. I

don't see how you can hold me responsible for an earthquake. Say fellers, Jim Colter is pretty far gone isn't he, if he thinks I am powerful enough to move the earth." Dan grinned, delighted with his own wit, but his cowboys only continued to stare at him solemnly.

"Glad you felt a little motion, though you was pretty safe out of the way," Jim went on in the same quiet fashion. "Seems like I could shut my eyes and tell you just how that earthquake happened. You ought to have seen the waters of Rainbow Creek dash up in the air and then begin to slide plum out of sight. It was most like a miracle."

Dan faced Jim impudently. "Well, go on, tell us how your miracle happened?" he invited scornfully.

Jacqueline was puzzled. She had no idea how Jim would be able to explain the peculiar phenomenon which they had just seen.

"Oh, a charge of dynamite caused our little earthquake," Jim explained briefly.

"You see, Mr. Norton, you have been trying to drain the water from our creek to your ranch for some time back, but digging a lower channel was pretty slow work. That little

bunch of dynamite just between your land and our lake has made a pretty nice passage for our water to flow through. I suppose you made your entrance underground somewhere near that clump of sage brush, so it would be hard for us to discover."

Dan shrugged his heavy shoulders, "What rotten nonsense," he returned sullenly.

Jacqueline's eyes were fairly starting with surprise and she opened her lips to ask a question but closed them quickly. She couldn't expect to comprehend Jim's accusation. What girl ever has understood anything about engineering?

Jim laughed, straightened up and glanced toward the three cowboys, who were grouped picturesquely on the opposite side of the divide. "Oh, you don't have to take my word for it," he remarked casually, "I will have one of the State engineers over to prove it to you. You see if there is one thing we are strict about in Wyoming, it is our water rights.

"You and your father shall pay us a tidy sum of money in damages for this work." Jim slowly let go the tight knot which had held Dan Norton. "Now get along home

when you like, young man," he concluded. "I am through with you for to-day."

Dan flung the lasso to the ground and glared angrily at Jim and then at Jack. But his eyes fell before Jacqueline Ralston's. Jack was looking at him steadily with the scornful, slightly haughty expression he so hated.

Dan smiled. His light blue eyes were almost green with temper and narrowed into two fine lines. "Oh, it don't matter about your old creek, at present," he jeered. "You can keep the water on Rainbow Ranch for another few months, when father and I take possession of the ranch, we can drain the water over here if we like. So long!" and he glanced contemptuously at Jack, as he marched by her.

Jack had her riding whip in her left hand. For a second she longed to strike at Dan Norton with it. How dared he speak in that calm and self-assured fashion of some day taking possession of their own beloved Rainbow Ranch? Jack's heart was like lead, but not a muscle of her lovely face moved, her eyelashes did not even tremble.

Jim watched Dan sneak across the divide and he and Jack waited until the four men

started on foot across the plain. Then Jim smiled a slow smile which meant many things. "Don't you worry quite so much about our losing our ranch, Jacqueline Ralston," Jim announced. "If old Daniel Norton had felt so sure he was going to succeed in getting our place away from us, he would never have tried to steal our water at this stage of the game."

The two horses were grazing near by and Jim lifted Jack into her saddle. They turned their faces toward Rainbow Lodge.

Once or twice, Jim rubbed his chin. "Pretty good day's work for us, boss?" he asked finally.

Jack's eyes danced and a deep rose color glowed in her cheeks. She did not look in the least like the girl who had received in tears the news of the possible loss of her home.

Jack laughed softly, under her breath. "It sure was a good day's work, overseer, and we'll fight till the hat drops," she answered, in the tone of another cowboy. Then Jack flicked her pony with her whip. "Do let's hurry, Jim," she called gaily. "I never saw anything in my life so delicious as the picture you made lassoing Dan. I am just dying to get home to tell the other girls."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WET BLANKET.

"JACK, how are we ever going to quit using slang?" Jean groaned.

"Oh, we do worse things, Jean Bruce," Jack answered unfeelingly. "Little we know how many crimes we do commit! Just wait until a straight-laced old maid gets hold of us! And what will Cousin Ruth say about Jim's grammar? You know she is a B.A. from some woman's college. Do you know Jean, I often wonder if Jim talks in the careless way he does simply because he has lived so long out here with the cowboys. He must have had some education when he was young, he seems to have read a great many books."

"Jim Colter is a clam," Jean remarked impatiently, forgetting her resolution to speak only "English, pure and undefiled." "He would rather die than to let us learn anything of his past. I do declare, Jack, that if he were anybody in the world except Jim, I should think he had something in his

life he wished to conceal. I wonder if he ever had a tragic love affair?"

"Oh, Jean, you are a romantic goose," Jack exclaimed. "What was it you had to show me?"

Jean and Jack were giving a thorough cleaning to the living-room; Aunt Ellen had shaken the rugs and polished the pine floor, but the two girls were dusting vigorously in every crack and corner and rubbing the brass candlesticks with an unaccustomed ardor.

Through the entire Lodge there rioted a sense of preparation, as before the approach of some great event.

Jean flung down her dust cloth, seized Jack by the hand and marched her over to the corner lined with their book shelves.

Jack discovered an entirely unknown row of books. "Why, Jean Bruce!" Jack exclaimed in amazement. "Where did you ever find these old things and what do we want with them anyhow?"

Jack was staring at Congressional reports, a few ancient law books and a treatise on medicine. But there also were eight volumes of Gibbon's "Rome," Greene's "History of The

English People," and several other valuable old histories, arranged in a conspicuous place on the book shelves. Jean's most cherished novels had been stuck out of sight.

Jean smiled a superior smile. "I found the books upstairs in Uncle's trunk, of course, and I brought them down here to impress our new chaperon or governess, which ever you choose to call her. I was determined she should not think we were perfect dunces when she arrived at Rainbow Lodge."

Jack appeared to reflect. "I don't see how it will do much good," she argued, half laughing. "Cousin Ruth will soon find out that we don't know anything in the books worth mentioning."

But Jean was not in the least discouraged. "First impressions are always the most important, Jacqueline Ralston," she announced calmly. "My advice to this family is to let Cousin Ruth get her shocks from our wild behavior by degrees so that she will have time to rally in between."

"Do you think she is going to find us so very dreadful?" Jack inquired quite seriously, without the trace of a smile. She was climbing up on a ladder to try to straighten a

beautiful golden lynx skin, which was slipping off the wall.

"Worse than wild Indians," Jean replied, unmoved, "just you mark my words, Miss Ralston. For instance, Miss Drew is going to announce that it is a perfect shame for any one to shoot a poor dear wildcat. Uncle ought to have reasoned with that cat when it jumped at him. She is going to hate us and all our ways forever and want to go back to her blessed New England in a week."

Jack sighed, "you are a Job's comforter, Jean. But you don't have to worry, I know Cousin Ruth will hold me responsible for our wicked ways. You see I wrote her that we did not want her to come out to us when she first said she would. Then I had to eat humble pie and say we did. But even if she does not like you or me, Jean, she can't help caring for Olive and Frieda. Olive is the prettiest, shyest girl in the world."

Jean nodded. "Jack," she asked more sympathetically, "is Cousin Ruth horribly old?"

"She is twenty-eight and a dreadful old maid," Jack confessed sadly. "Jean, you have simply got to ride over to the station with Jim to meet her this afternoon."

Jean shook her head and dropped languidly into a large reclining chair. "I am not at all well, Jack," she answered, "I forgot to tell you this morning, but I feel a bad cold coming on. If I should take a long ride I am sure I should be quite ill."

Jack stared at her cousin searchingly. "You don't show the least sign of a cold, Jean," she argued.

"That is because appearances are deceiving, sweet coz," Jean murmured. "How is our dear lady cousin going to get over to the ranch?"

"Oh, Jim is going to lead a horse over for her to ride back on," Jack announced quite unconscious of breakers ahead. "You see the train gets in so late that we couldn't get home until after dark, if we drove over, and I thought it would be kind of nice to have Cousin Ruth arrive at Rainbow Lodge just at twilight. You didn't think to look among father's books for a stray paper, did you, Jean?" Jack asked, trying to appear indifferent.

"Yes, I did, Jack," Jean returned quickly. "There wasn't anything. Let's don't talk about it. I promise to have everything at

the Lodge to-night in ship-shape order, when you arrive. We have cleaned up the whole house and we will put on our best clothes and stand out on the veranda to meet you; we might even sing, 'Hail, the conquering hero comes,' if you think it would be appreciated."

"Do you suppose Jim could meet Cousin Ruth without me?" Jack queried, as a forlorn hope.

Jean shook her head decidedly. "Most certainly not, Jack; never in the world! The lady would think Jim was trying to kidnap her and he would be scared to death." Jean kissed Jack apologetically. "I know I am horrid, Jack, to put all the hard things off on you because you are a little bit the oldest, but really, if I had to meet Cousin Ruth at the station, I'd shiver and shake until I fell off my horse. I will do the next hard thing that has to be done on this place, I will honestly, cross my heart and body," Jean argued penitently.

Three weeks had passed since Jim Colter's and Jack's eventful ride across the ranch. It was late October, but unusually mild and warm. Cousin Ruth had been written to on the very evening of the decision, so that there

could be no chance for a change of purpose on the part of the ranch girls, for they felt that they were in for it and were determined to do their best.

Miss Ruth Drew was entirely alone in the world except for one good-for-nothing brother and had just enough money to eke out a bare existence in a dull little Vermont town. She wanted an object in life and believed that the ranch girls needed her. So soon as Jack's letter arrived, she had telegraphed that she would come to them at once. Since then, the days at Rainbow Lodge had slipped by like magic until the fated day arrived. Jim Colter and Jack, with many inward misgivings, mounted their ponies and leading an extra one for Miss Drew, rode to the station.

The express from the East would be due in an hour.

Jack and Jim paced restlessly up and down the station platform, with their arms locked. Jim looking even more wretched and unhappy than Jack. He wondered how in the world he was to treat the old lady cousin when she came out to them, and whether she would shut him off from caring for his adored ranch girls.

Jim had not the remotest idea of Miss Ruth

Drew's age. The name had an elderly sound to it and Jack had described her as an old maid; consequently Jim's mental picture showed a small, grey-haired woman with corkscrew curls, somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty, with thin lips and a penetrating eye. She would probably reduce him to powder with a single glance, but he meant to be as polite to her as he humanly could and to speak to her only when it was absolutely necessary.

"Jim," Jack suggested finally, "you have sighed like a human bellows three times in the past five minutes. If you meet Cousin Ruth with that expression, she'll think we are sorry she has come. Please go over into the town and buy yourself some tobacco or something to cheer you. I'll get on Tricks and ride up and down near the track for a while, and then we will both be in a better humor when the train finally does get in."

Miss Ruth Drew sighed. She was sitting in the Pullman car with her eyes closed and an expression of supreme fatigue on her sallow but not unattractive face.

It seemed to her that she had been traveling ever since she could remember. Were

there people in the world idiotic enough to think there was beauty in the western prairies? For days she had looked out on bare stretches of endless brown plains rising and falling in one monotonous chain. The sand was in her eyes, in her ears, in her mouth; worst of all, it had piled up in a great mass of homesickness on her heart.

How could she have turned her back on dear New England villages, with their sleepy, green and white homesteads and trim gardens, for this vast desert? "Of course, she was doing her duty in coming to look after four motherless girls," Ruth remembered, with a pang, but her duty at the present moment did not appear cheerful.

When the conductor announced that the next station was hers, Ruth sat up and arranged her hat and veil neatly. She adjusted her glasses on her thin nose and put back the single lock of hair that had strayed from its place. Her heart began to flutter a little faster. Was she actually arriving in the neighborhood of Rainbow Ranch? It didn't seem possible!

If you can imagine a very prim, grey mouse kind of girl, who looked a good deal older than

she was, with ash brown hair and eyes and a neat tailor-made suit to match, you will get a very good impression of Miss Ruth Drew. Her figure was very good and her mouth might have been pretty, except that it looked as though she disapproved of a great many things, and that is never becoming. But she was tired and homesick and it was not a fair time to judge her.

It would be another fifteen minutes before she would get into Wolfville, and Ruth closed her eyes again. There was nothing to see out of her window that was in the least interesting and she preferred to think about the ranch girls. She wondered if they would be very hard to get on with, if they were very wild and reckless. It made her shudder: the idea of her cousin's children growing up with only a common cowboy for their friend and adviser.

There was a little stir in the car, the engine had slowed down. Ruth opened her eyes; what had made her traveling companions' faces brighten with interest? Three or four of them rushed across the aisle and pressed their noses up against the window panes on her side of the coach. One man threw up the

car window, leaned out and shouted: "Hurrah!" A woman waved her handkerchief.

Ruth's curiosity was aroused and she gazed languidly out her window. Flying along the road that followed the line of the track, was a Western pony. The horse was running like a streak, his nostrils quivering with excitement, his feet pounding along the hard sand.

"Beat it! beat it!" cried the excited stranger. "Did anybody ever see such riding before?" The man addressed the entire car.

Ruth could see that there was someone on the horse, running a race with the express train. The rider was in brown and Ruth could not observe very distinctly. She supposed that it was an Indian boy.

"That girl is a wonder!" the man exclaimed, who had been traveling next the prim young woman from the East for four days without daring to look straight at her. He leaned over his seat and smiled.

"Girl!" Miss Drew repeated in surprise. "Was the figure on horseback a girl?" Ruth was quite willing to admit that she had never seen such horsemanship in her life. The girl was perfectly graceful and at times she leaned over to urge her pony on, or bent sideways as

though she swayed with the motion of the wind. She seemed to rest on her horse so lightly that she added no burden to him but was like the spirit of motion carrying him on.

The engine ahead whistled three times. The train was moving slowly, still it was remarkable how the rider kept up with the passenger coach.

Just as the car rolled into the station, the girl on horseback flashed a smile at the people watching her from the car windows, and Ruth had a brief glimpse of a shaft of sunlight caught in a mass of bright, bronze hair and a pair of radiant cheeks and eyes. Then she seized her suit case and umbrella, slipped into her overshoes and hurried out of the train. She had read that it rarely rained in Wyoming, except in the spring, but she wished to run no risk of taking cold.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNFORTUNATE ARRIVAL.

THERE was no one on the platform when Ruth dismounted, but a tall man, who was not looking for her. He was oddly handsome in spite of his queer Western clothes, and Ruth wished for an instant that he might be Mr. Colter. Evidently he was not. He stared at her curiously for a few seconds, then searched anxiously along every other exit of the train.

Cousin Ruth could discover no one else. The madcap girl, who had run her wild race with the train, was a little distance off. She was holding three ponies by their bridles, and as one of them was dancing with nervousness on account of the noise of the engine, the girl had her hands full.

Ruth Drew's heart sank to ten degrees below zero. Had she traveled across the continent to a wild Western town to find no one to meet her? The ranch girls could not be so rude; and Ruth determined to ask the good-looking man with the worried expression, what she ought to do.

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"CAN I DO ANYTHING FOR YOU, MA'AM?"

Jim was gazing sadly after the departing coaches. You see he was looking for a white-haired woman of about fifty, and supposed that the old lady hadn't known enough to get off the train at the right station, and had gone on to the next stop. How in the world would he be able to connect with her?

Jim saw the young woman on the platform, but she wasn't as large and didn't seem to him to be much older than Jack. He supposed she had come to visit some of their ranch neighbors, yet she looked unhappy, as though she wanted to cry. Jim's heart was touched.

He took off his broad Mexican hat, and Ruth thought with a sudden gasp that she had never seen such blue eyes and such black hair before.

"Can I do anything for you, ma'am?" Jim inquired politely. "It 'pears like your folks haven't come to meet you."

Ruth shook her head. She was too full of tears to trust herself to speak for a moment. "I am afraid not," she answered finally. "Will you be good enough to tell me how I can get over to the Rainbow Ranch? I have come to live with the Ralston girls. I am their cousin—"

"Not Ruth?" Jim exclaimed, forgetting his shyness in his surprise. "You can't be Cousin Ruth, because the girls told me she was an old maid." Jim stopped abruptly, conscious that he had put his foot in it with his first remark to their new visitor.

Cousin Ruth drew herself up a little stiffly. She did not like to be called "an old maid," perhaps because she knew she often acted and looked like one, but she was too tired to care much about anything at present. She only longed with all her heart to be driven home to Rainbow Lodge.

"I am Cousin Ruth just the same," she answered feebly, trying to smile.

Jim grabbed her suit case, carried her umbrella like a shot gun, and marched her toward the girl who was holding the three horses, the same girl who had shocked and entertained her from the car window.

Jacqueline slid off her pony and passed the three bridles to Jim. She did not know whether she ought to kiss her cousin or only to shake hands with her, for there was something in Ruth's expression that froze Jack's first affectionate intention. Ruth was truly horrified at Jack's behavior. She didn't see

how a girl could be so reckless of appearances.

Jack held out a slim, cool hand. "I am awfully glad to see you, Cousin Ruth. It was very good of you to come out to us. I hope you are not tired," Jack remarked, as though she had learned her greeting out of an etiquette book. She was as stiff as a wooden Indian, because she felt so abominably shy.

Ruth's feelings were hurt. She did not think of her own manners, merely of Jack's. "Yes, I am tired," she replied coldly. "Is the carriage waiting for us in the town?"

Jack's face reddened. Jim gave a hasty glance of embarrassment toward the two women. There was an awkward silence.

Jack found her voice first. "We didn't bring a wagon over for you, Cousin Ruth. We don't own a carriage," Jack explained. "It is so late that we didn't think we would get to the ranch before night, if we drove. We brought a horse for you to ride."

Ruth Drew sank limply on the ground. "A horse to ride!" she exclaimed faintly. "I have never been on a horse in my life. How far is it to the ranch?"

"Ten miles," Jack acknowledged shame-

facedly. Ten miles did sound like a great distance to a stranger, although the ranch girls had always thought that they lived very close to town; but the idea of a full-grown, able-bodied woman not knowing how to ride horseback had never entered Jacqueline Ralston's head. What on the face of the green earth were they to do? "You had better go over into the town and see if you can get a carriage, Jim," Jack advised. "I never thought of Cousin Ruth's not liking to ride. I can lead the two horses home, if you will drive her over."

Jack was really miserably embarrassed at her own failure as a hostess. She knew that they were making a dreadful first impression on Cousin Ruth, and Jean had warned her that first impressions were most important. But Ruth Drew thought she caught something in Jack's tone that sounded supercilious. There was nothing so extraordinary in Ruth's being ignorant of horses, she had never been rich enough to own one; yet it was quite impossible for the Eastern girl and the Western one to understand each other's points of view.

Jim Colter came back utterly crestfallen; there was no carriage to be had in the town.

With the courage of despair, Ruth let herself be swung up on the homely broncho. She was horribly frightened, although Jack assured her that she was riding the gentlest pony on the ranch, one that belonged to little Frieda. It made no difference, Ruth slipped and slid. She clutched the pony's mane in her hands and let Jim lead her, yet every time the pony went out of a walk, Ruth wanted to shriek with fear. She had traveled hundreds and hundreds of miles from Vermont to Wyoming, but the distance was as nothing to her ten-mile horseback ride to Rainbow Lodge.

Every muscle in Ruth's body ached; she had a horrid stitch in her side and swayed uncertainly in the saddle. Each moment she expected to fall off.

The ride home seemed almost as long to Jack and Jim as it did to their guest. They were so ashamed of themselves, and Jack's cheeks were hot with blushes every time she looked at her new cousin.

After about an hour of slow traveling Jack caught sight of Ruth. Her face was grey with pain and fatigue.

"Stop, Jim," Jack called sharply. "Cousin Ruth is going to faint."

Ruth had a dim recollection of being lifted off her horse and for the rest of her journey she felt herself being held up by a strong arm. Now and then a man's voice spoke to her, as if she were a little girl and he were trying to comfort her. He was a haven of refuge and Ruth did not think or care who or what he was, and finally he brought her safely to Rainbow Lodge.

Jack thought she had never seen her home so lovely. There was a golden glow behind the house and the wind stirred through the quivering yellow leaves of the cottonwood trees. Rainbow creek lay on one side of them and on the other the broad sweep of the plains. Jack gazed wistfully at Ruth who was riding in front of Jim; surely their new cousin would show some interest in her new home!

Jean, Frieda and Olive ran out in the yard to meet the cavalcade. Jack waved her hand, but Cousin Ruth did not open her eyes.

"We are about home, now, Miss Drew," Jim found courage to say.

"Heaven be praised!" Ruth sighed. She could barely speak.

Aunt Ellen was waiting on the porch in a starched white apron, and took in the situa-

tion with quick sympathy. She saw her girls' disappointed, embarrassed faces and their cousin's worn one.

Aunt Ellen gathered Ruth in her arms. "Leave her alone, honies, she is just tired out," she explained to the ranch girls. And without the least effort from Ruth, Aunt Ellen got her in bed, fed her some broth and told her to go to sleep and not to worry.

In the big living-room with its splendid pine fire, Jack, Jean, Frieda and Olive ate their feast of welcome alone.

It was hardly worth while to have taken so much trouble to get ready for a guest who looked neither at you nor your house when she came in to it.

Jack was plainly cast down. Jean, Frieda and Olive were almost as discouraged.

"I think Cousin Ruth is tiresome," Jean exclaimed petulantly. "I don't see why she couldn't have spoken to us."

Frieda's blue eyes filled with tears. "I don't believe she is going to like us very much," she added disconsolately.

"I am dreadfully afraid of her already," Olive sighed. "Are you sure, Jack, that you explained to her about me? She

may not like my living with you at the ranch."

Jack put her arm about Olive and drew her toward the fire. "Of course Cousin Ruth will care for you as much as she does for any one of us, Olive; she has to," Jack insisted. "Remember that while you haven't any name of your own, you are Olive Ralston. Isn't it splendid that old Laska and Josef have left us in peace? I wonder if they do intend to give you up to us without any more fuss!"

Olive shivered a little in Jack's grasp. "I hope so," she answered fervently. "Laska and the old Indian life seem hundreds of years away. Yet I have been at the ranch only a little less than a month."

"Don't worry, Olive," Jack returned thoughtfully. "Let us just be glad to-night that we have one more evening alone;" which shows how Jack felt about the arrival of the new chaperon.

The girls sat up quite late. Frieda went to sleep with her head in Jack's lap, Jean fell to nodding, but Olive and Jack were wide awake. Olive was older than the ranch girls had thought her at first. She must have come next to Jack, although old Laska had never told Olive her exact birthday.

CHAPTER XV.

ALL SAVE JACK!

IT was nearly noon next day when the latest comer to Rainbow Lodge awoke. She still felt sore and stiff from her long journeyings, but she could never remember such a blissful sleep in her life.

Out her bedroom window, Ruth thought she caught the sound of the girls' voices and slipping into her wrapper, threw up her window blind. The sun flooded her room with a curious radiance. Ruth felt she had never known what real sunlight was before. It certainly cleared away the mists from her heart and brain.

Ruth gazed around her room. It was a joy to her in its wide sunlit emptiness. The girls had hung white muslin curtains at the windows, the little pinewood table, chair and bureau were painted white and the bed was white iron. A little fire burned in the low grate, for Aunt Ellen had stolen in and laid it, without wakening their guest. There was no color in the room except the soft brown stain

on the walls and floor, and one bright, red and black Indian blanket.

Ruth understood that the girls had made the place lovely for her. She began to feel that perhaps they did want her with them after all. Unconsciously she yielded to the cheerful spirit of Rainbow Lodge and hurrying into her clothes, found Aunt Ellen ready with her toast and coffee.

Aunt Ellen explained that the ranch girls had disappeared somewhere about the ranch. They had waited for their visitor, but when it seemed that she was going to sleep all day, they vanished.

"You mustn't mind, Miss," Aunt Ellen murmured apologetically, "but they can't somehow stay indoors, so long as the good weather holds."

Cousin Ruth went shyly out on the ranch-house veranda. She was thinking regretfully of what a bad impression she had made on her cousins the night before, because she, too, had planned a very different kind of meeting. No recollection remained of any one of the girls, except Jack, whom she would always remember as the young Centaur she saw racing across the plains.

Ruth strolled slowly down the path through the cottonwood trees. She was beginning to feel lonely, and hoped one of the girls would turn up soon. Above her head the yellow leaves rustled softly and the brown landscape no longer looked uninteresting. It was all new and strange, she thought, but some day she might learn to care for it.

If Miss Drew had not been so deep in her reflections, she would not have been so terrified a moment later. For suddenly in her way there loomed a big shaggy animal and a pair of huge paws clung to her shoulders.

Ruth screamed.

"Down! Shep, down!" cried a merry voice. "I am so sorry, Cousin Ruth. Shep is our watchdog. He never realizes that visitors don't understand his friendly intentions."

Jean slipped through an opening in the trees, carrying a tin bucket on her arm. "I have been for some milk," she explained. "The cows Jim keeps for our use have their stable near Jim's house and Aunt Ellen wanted some extra milk and sent me for it. I hope you feel quite rested."

Jean sometimes tilted her head, with its mass of heavy brown hair, a bit to one side,

when she was deeply interested. She surveyed their new chaperon with such a merry, friendly sparkle in her wide-open brown eyes that Ruth was charmed with her at once. She couldn't have guessed that Miss Jean Bruce was making a rapid inventory of Miss Ruth Drew's character, inside and out.

"Manner, stiff and old maidy; complexion, bad; hair pretty, if she fixed it differently; mouth looks like she has eaten something acid, except when she smiles, then mouth and eyes quite nice; figure small, but distinctly good."

Ruth was patting old Shep, for as usual Jean was talking in a steady stream. "Hope you didn't mind our going off and leaving you," she apologized. "You see we have a good many small duties about the ranch. Jack probably won't be back until luncheon, but I am sure we will soon find Frieda and Olive."

Ruth leaned over. "Won't you kiss me, Jean?" she asked unexpectedly. "I have an idea you and I may be good friends." She guessed that Jean was mischievous and full of fun, but not nearly so hard to influence as headstrong Jack.

Jean's manner softened. She put down her milk pail and gave the much-discussed cousin an affectionate hug. "I hope you are going to be happy with us at Rainbow Lodge," she exclaimed. "You know we are used to doing pretty much what we like, but remember, if things go wrong, you are going to tell us how to behave," and she ended her advice with such a funny expression that Cousin Ruth laughed and slipped her hand through Jean's arm.

"Just let me get through with playing 'Molly the Milkmaid,' Cousin Ruth, and we will go find the other girls," Jean suggested when they got back to the ranch house. A minute later Jean reported that Aunt Ellen thought Olive and Frieda were somewhere near the creek. Olive had suggested that she would try to catch some fresh fish for Cousin Ruth's luncheon.

The waters of Rainbow Creek were no longer in danger of flowing into the Norton ranch. Jim and his men had built a dam at the end of Rainbow Lake, where the dynamite explosion had taken place. The Ralston Ranch had filed suit for damages against Mr. Norton, but the claim had not yet been settled.

Ruth and Jean crossed some stepping-stones to the wooded side of the stream and had walked only a short distance beyond, when Ruth spied a gleam of color a little farther on. It was Frieda, who wore a red Tam, a red sweater and her long blonde plaits tied with red ribbons. She was sitting on the stump of an old tree sewing some bits of ribbon together as calmly as though she had been in a little rocking-chair by the fire. She looked so like a little German *mädchen*, though she was so far away from the *Vaterland*, that Ruth wanted to laugh aloud.

"Frieda!" called an unfamiliar voice.

Frieda glanced quickly up. She was making a pincushion for their new cousin and had not had time to finish, but hoped to be through with it before Olive landed her fish.

The bits of silk ribbon fluttered to the ground as Frieda caught sight of a stranger not much larger than Jean. She had her arms outstretched and such an eager look in her nearsighted eyes that Frieda flew straight to her.

"I am awfully glad to see you, I am really," Frieda announced, giving her new cousin an old-fashioned hug. "There are such a lot of

things I want you to show me that Jack and Jean and Olive don't know a single thing about. And I am sure I shall like you in spite of what—" But a warning look from Jean cut short Frieda's confidences.

"Where is Olive?" Jean asked quickly.

"She is not very far away," Frieda answered, "but you must walk softly or you will frighten the fish."

Cousin Ruth tiptoed as softly as Frieda could wish. She was curious to see this new ranch girl whom Jack had written her about, and she would have been sorry to have missed her first vision of Olive.

Olive hung out over the water, where the creek deepened into a small pool, under the branches of a scrub pine tree. One slender arm clung to a limb of the young tree as she looked down into the muddy water in the shadow of the evergreen boughs. Ruth had a quick and vivid impression of her glossy black hair; her delicate figure, with its peculiar woodland grace, clothed in an old green dress the color of the autumn grass, and caught her breath in wonder. The girl looked like a dryad who had stolen out of the heart of a tree to catch an image of herself in the water.

"Olive, don't fall in the creek," Jean called out gaily. "Come and be introduced to Cousin Ruth; she would rather see you than have fish for her luncheon."

Olive gave a startled cry and Jean made a dive for her. But Olive did not tumble into the water. She gave a quick jerk to her fishing line, hooked and drew in a good-sized trout. Then Olive slipped up the bank to the others. Ruth looked curiously at the dark, rich coloring of her face; she did not seem like an Indian, and yet she certainly bore no resemblance to an American girl. Cousin Ruth felt that she would be an interesting study, although Olive was too shy to say more than a dozen words of greeting.

"Come on, let's walk a little farther along the creek, Jack won't be home for a while yet," Jean declared. "Jack thinks the ranch would go to rack and ruin unless she were around to boss things."

"Don't you think maybe it would?" Olive questioned gently.

Jean laughed. "Oh, I expect so, Olive; but how you do take up for Jack! Cousin Ruth, you will have to protect Frieda and me.

Olive thinks Jack is perfection and agrees to anything she says."

"Look, look! Oh, please don't talk," Frieda cried in excitement, pointing up in the sky above the bed of the creek.

A weird troop of birds was flying toward them, uttering a queer, guttural noise. They were some distance off, but their short wings seemed to clack like Spanish castanets and their long legs looked like dangling bits of string.

"What on earth are those creatures?" Ruth asked helplessly. She was surely seeing interesting sights in what she had thought a barren and desert land.

"They are sand cranes," Olive whispered softly. "Let's be quite still. They are flying so low, I think they mean to alight. They must have mistaken the creek for a river."

Frieda snickered and put her hand to her mouth.

"Shsh, Frieda," Olive cautioned. "These funny birds are as shy as deer. If they do alight, they will probably come down in the cleared field."

The birds swept slowly down nearer the

earth in a half circle, still uttering their curious cries. It was as Olive said, they were moving toward an open field.

The four girls crept breathlessly through the trees and bushes, until they could find peepholes.

The cranes dipped down. One of them touched the ground, then another descended, and the third joined them; the birds stood each with a long thin leg drawn up out of sight, until the whole flock had landed in a circle on the ground. The leader must have squawked: "Bow to your partners, swing your corners," for the birds immediately started a stately dance. They flapped their wings, they twisted their long necks, they fanned their short tails and made strange signs to one another. They hopped together to a given spot and then hopped back again, never for a single moment losing their solemn dignity.

Ruth held in as long as she could. But really this dance of the sand-hill cranes was the funniest sight she had ever seen in her life! She laughed silently, until the tears ran down her cheeks, her glasses slid off her nose and she forgot she had ever thought of being

homesick. Frieda chuckled softly at first. But finally Jean and Olive joined in, and the secret audience burst into a roar.

The leader of the cranes cast a shocked, horrified glance behind him, clacked a signal to his followers and the birds rose together in flight.

Olive ran out into the field and a long, light brown feather fluttering downward from the last bird in the flock, rested for a second in her black hair. Frieda skipped toward her. "Give the feather to me, Olive," Frieda begged. "It is exactly what I want to trim my doll's hat."

But Olive made no answer, and when she joined Ruth and Jean she looked a little pale.

"What's the trouble, Olive?" Jean asked. "You look so funny, just like you were frightened over something."

Olive shook her head. "Oh, I know I am silly," she explained, "and I don't really believe in it. But there is an old Indian legend, that when a bird drops a feather at your feet, it is to give you a warning of approaching danger. There is an Indian story of a young chief who was on his way to war. Three times an eagle cast down a feather

before him. The chief knew what the signal meant, but he went on into battle just the same. Of course he and his men were killed!"

Jack was waiting at the ranch house when the girls returned. She tried to stifle the pang of jealousy she felt when Frieda clung to her new cousin, instead of racing to her in her usual fashion.

Jack and Ruth shook hands politely. Each one of them tried to be as friendly as possible to the other. But to save their lives they could not get rid of their first feeling of antagonism.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK.

"THERE is not the least harm in it, Cousin Ruth. It is only that you don't understand our Western customs," Jack announced sweetly.

She was standing in front of the living-room fire with her hands clasped behind her. Her head was up in the air, showing the firm line of her chin and the mutinous expression of her eyes, which were half closed.

It was after tea at Rainbow Lodge and, except for Jack and Cousin Ruth, the scene would have been a peaceful and beautiful one.

Jean was playing softly on a new piano which had lately been installed at the Lodge, for among other things the new governess was giving the ranch girls music lessons. Jean, who had studied before and had a good deal of talent, was rarely away from the piano when she was in the house. Frieda leaned against her cousin, watching her play, while Olive had a book in her lap, pretending to

read. Cousin Ruth sat by the library table with a basket of mending beside her and a very uncompromising expression on her face. She was pale to-night, although she looked in better health and younger than she had when she first arrived at Rainbow Ranch three weeks before.

"I am sorry to differ with you, Jack," Ruth returned firmly. "But it would be very difficult to convince me that a round-up is any place for a young girl. If it is a western custom for girls to attend them, then I think the custom is shocking. In any case I am certainly not willing for you to go."

Jack's eyes flashed defiantly. For three weeks there had been a kind of armed neutrality between Jacqueline Ralston and her new cousin. Jack considered that she had been very patient with Cousin Ruth's bossing. Ruth believed that she had been very forbearing with Jack's pride. Jack had given up her beloved custom of riding over the ranch every morning, to spend three poky hours in the schoolroom with the other girls, but she did not intend to be interfered with any further in her plans for running their ranch.

"I am sorry, Cousin Ruth," Jack argued, still keeping her temper under control. "In anything else I should be quite willing to give up to your judgment, but you see I happen to know about our Wyoming round-ups and you don't. They are not nearly so wild and bloodthirsty as you imagine. I shall not go near the place where they are herding the cattle, though lots of times women drive over to the round-ups and stay on the outskirts of things just to see the cowboys and horses pass by. It's simply great!" For a moment Jack's eyes sparkled, but then she tried to appear more serious. "Besides, Cousin Ruth, it happens to be a matter of business for me to attend the round-up this fall. This is the last one until spring and, as I told you, it will be only a small one, but lots of our cattle have been disappearing for months and I want to consult with some of our neighboring ranchmen about it. Jean Bruce, do please stop making that noise," Jack demanded, her bad humor flashing out at Jean.

Jean brought her music to an end with a loud crash, and then came over and sat down cross-legged on a rug by the fire in front of Ruth.

"Don't waste your time arguing with Jack, Cousin Ruth," Jean advised. "When she says she ought to do a thing, she means she intends to do it. It is perfectly absurd for Jack to insist that she has any business at the round-up, for she knows perfectly well that Jim can attend to everything. It is nobody in the world but old Dan Norton who is stealing our cattle and it seems to me we had better not have any more trouble with him, until more important affairs are settled."

"I entirely agree with you, Jean," said Cousin Ruth severely. "Jack, you are not old enough to decide such matters for yourself."

Jack did not answer. She directed a single angry glance at Jean, but Jean was hard to quarrel with. She made the most irritating speeches and then looked as innocent as a lamb. Frieda had stolen up to Jack and slipped her hand in her sister's. It frightened Frieda terribly when people quarreled, and Jack saw that her little sister's eyes were full of tears.

Jack walked over and sat down in a big chair, drawing little Frieda up in her lap and there was an uncomfortable silence in the

room until feet sounded along the hall and a knock came at the living-room door.

"Why it's Jim!" Jean exclaimed in surprise, scrambling to her feet. "I wonder what brings him up to the ranch house to-night? We have seen hardly anything of him since Cousin Ruth arrived!"

Ruth bent her head lower over her work. It was true. She need not have feared Mr. Colter's influence with the ranch girls, for he had not been to the Lodge, except on business, since she undertook to chaperon them. He was very polite to her, but he seemed afraid to speak in her presence. Ruth wondered if she seemed as much of an old maid to him as he had thought her at first.

"Jim, what's up? You are a swell to-night," Jean teased. "Did you think we were giving a party?"

Jim did look different. He wore a stiff white shirt instead of a soft flannel one and could hardly turn his head in his starched linen collar.

Frieda flew to him with a little cry of welcome.

"What's the matter, baby?" Jim demanded, noticing Frieda's flushed cheeks. As he

gazed slowly around the family group, he noticed Miss Jacqueline Ralston's haughty expression and Miss Ruth Drew's severe one; saw Olive's troubled face and Jean's mischievous one. "I guess I had better be going," Jim suggested, backing toward the door.

"Oh, no, Jim," Jack insisted carelessly. "There is nothing the matter, only Cousin Ruth does not wish me to go to the round-up with you in the morning. Will you please tell her that cowboys aren't all villains!"

Jim frowned. "If your Cousin don't want you to go, Jack, seems like you had better stay at home," he declared quietly.

A little flush of triumph spread over Ruth's face. This was her first trouble with any one of the ranch girls and their friend had sided with her. She gave him a grateful glance, then closed her lips more firmly than ever. With any one of the four girls save Jack, she would have tried persuasion instead of command. But it seemed to her perfectly useless to attempt to influence Jack.

Jack shrugged her shoulders. "I don't agree with you, Jim," she declared obstinately.

Jim brought his lips together with a snap and stared straight at the elder Miss Ralston.

"Look here, Jack," he said, "wasn't it you who asked your cousin to come out here to live with you, so as to have some one to tell you what was right? Now it seems to me that you only want her to tell you what you happen to want to do. I wasn't at all certain that you ought to ride over to the round-up with me, but I've been treating you like a boy so long, I can't somehow remember you're a girl. Stay at home and keep out of mischief." Jim laughed.

Ruth smiled, thinking the battle was won, but Jack got up calmly and marched out of the room and they heard her bedroom door close.

"I am afraid Jack is kind of hard-headed, but you mustn't mind," Jim murmured apologetically. "You see she has always had things pretty much her own way."

"Oh, let's don't talk about Jack," Jean expostulated. "Jim, I have been telling Cousin Ruth that it is perfectly absurd for her not to learn how to ride horseback and that she might as well be buried alive as not to know how to ride out here on the ranch. The very idea, we can't go to return Mrs. Simpson's and the lovely Laura's call without

hitching up our old mess-wagon. For goodness sake, won't you teach Cousin Ruth to ride? She won't be so scared with you."

"Sure Mike," Jim exclaimed heartily and then turned a dark mahogany from embarrassment. He had intended to use only copy-book language in his conversation with the new governess.

Ruth was surprised. Jim was a puzzle to her, but there was no doubt that he was very kind and very good-looking.

"I shall be horribly stupid and nervous, Mr. Colter," Ruth protested, "but if you are sure you won't mind the trouble?"

Jim did not leave the ranch house until ten o'clock that evening. He managed to have five minutes alone with Ruth, after the girls said good-night.

"Miss Drew," he whispered, "will you be good enough not to let Olive go away from the ranch alone? I came up to the Lodge to-night not knowing whether or not I should tell the girls, but I have received threatening notices from the Indians lately. They say they are going to have the girl back with them at any cost. I don't believe they have any right

to her. She is old enough to be a free agent, but the Indians are a queer, revengeful lot. They can bide their time and strike when you least expect it."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ROUND-UP.

JUST after dawn, Olive stole softly into Jack's and Jean's bedrooms. Jean was asleep. But Jack's place was empty. On her pillow was a sheet of paper addressed to "Miss Ruth Drew."

Olive alone of the group before the living-room fire in the evening just past, had realized that Jack had no idea of giving up her intention.

Olive slipped quickly into her clothes, determined to follow her friend. She was unusually timid, but she knew that Jack must not go alone among the wild cattle and the strange men who gathered at the autumn round-up. The girl had little knowledge of what a round-up was like but knew that the Indians often went to it and camped about on the outskirts of the plains to enjoy the racing and sports that usually closed the day's work.

Jack must have had about a half hour's start of Olive. She rode as fast as she could

tear for the first few miles of the way, knowing that Jim had started several hours before. Their cowboys had been off over the plains for two days searching for their stray cattle and herding them into the great open field selected for the round-up. There was no one to follow her and Jack slowed down. Then her heart began to fail her the least little bit, for she supposed everybody at the ranch would be furious with her for her disobedience.

Jack heard another horse coming along the trail behind her. Her repentance vanished, for she presumed Miss Drew had sent some one to bring her ignominiously back home.

"Jack, Jack," Olive's gentle voice called. "Won't you please slow down a little? Your horse is faster than mine and my poor beast is tired already."

Jacqueline waited, but she stared at Olive reproachfully. "I did not think you would come to try to make me go back home, Olive," Jack exclaimed. "I thought you knew that when I said I intended to do a thing, I would do it, in spite of all the Miss Ruth Drews and Mr. Jim Colters in the world."

Olive knew that Jack was behaving abominably but she could not help feeling the deep-

est admiration for her. To Olive, Jack's courage and high spirit were glorious. Olive was so shy and frightened; she had borne so much ill treatment from the time she was a little girl that her nature was almost crushed and she could only contend with people when she was driven to the last limit of patience. But when Olive made up her mind to a step, she had the Indian's power of endurance.

"I only came to go along to the round-up with you, Jack," Olive replied quietly.

Jack flushed. She was fairly sure of being able to bear her own burdens, but she did hate getting other people into trouble. "You are awfully sweet, Olive dear, but do go back home," Jack urged. "Jim and Cousin Ruth will both be furiously angry with us and there is no reason why you should have any of the blame. You know you will hate this old round-up and be dreadfully frightened, and that you are only coming on my account."

Olive shook her head. "Never mind, Jack," she answered, "I have come with you now so I would have to get my share of the scolding and I am not going to have you go to that place alone." Olive kept her horse just behind Jack's and the two girls rode

for a short time in silence. By and by Jack sighed.

"What's the matter, Jack?" Olive asked quickly.

Jack laughed wickedly. "Oh, it is not that I have repented of my evil deed, Olive," she returned. "It is only that I am so dreadfully hungry. I sneaked off this morning without a bit of food. I know we can get some lunch at the mess-wagons, or perhaps we may find some one we know at the round-up. But the question with me is, how am I ever going to live until then?"

Olive silently produced two rolls with slices of bacon between them.

"I stole them on my way to the stable," she announced happily. "I knew you hadn't eaten anything and I didn't dare to wait."

The two girls ate their outdoor breakfast ravenously, for both were enjoying their morning ride. It was cold, but they wore heavy sweaters and corduroy riding skirts and besides, the swift ride had sent the warm blood tingling through them. Jack was in brown and Olive in green, the color Jack liked best for her. The sun had just risen and there was a faint rose glow over the

bare prairies, and in the distance the girls spied a few coyotes racing along over the hard ground in search of their breakfast, but for miles and miles there was no sign of human life.

Finally the girls rode up to a pair of tents set up within no great distance of the plain chosen for the round-up. There was a fire near one of them, but the girls saw no people about and decided that they must have been used by the cowboys for their sleeping quarters at night.

Olive brought her pony closer to Jack's.

"Don't be nervous, Olive," said Jack reassuringly. "I expect the round-up is a pretty wild business, but we won't go near enough to get into trouble and you must be sure to stay close to me. I shall try to see some one to ask about our cattle and then we will start right back home. We will be sure to be at Rainbow Lodge by night."

Away off in the distance, the girls soon saw a great swirling cloud of grey dust, rising over the yellow plain. They could distinguish an enormous mass of moving objects and hear a far hollow roaring and bellowing of men and animals. To the left, across a

diagonal trail, Jack saw a dark line of wagons at some distance from the round-up. She knew they were the mess-wagons and carriages of the ranchmen, who came over to superintend the branding of their cattle. If the ranchmen happened to live near the scene of the round-up their wives and families sometime drove over to spend a few hours, but the women were careful not to go near the frightened animals and returned home before night.

The two girls moved slowly along this trail.

Jack's eyes were dancing and her cheeks were glowing with excitement. She dearly loved this typical western scene and its noise and savagery did not frighten her. It was a part of the business of the cattlemen to which she had always been accustomed. She was sorry of course that the poor animals had to be burned with the brands of their owners, but since the cattle ranged together through vast tracts of land, she knew of no other way by which one ranchman could distinguish his cattle from another's. Jack had been careful never to witness the branding, but she had often seen the cowboys driving the herds across the plains.

But Olive did not feel so cheerful. The distant noise and the surging crowd alarmed her. She wished that she and Jack were safe at home.

Coming at full speed down the trail toward them, the two girls spied two cowboys wearing the full cowboy regalia, leather suits with fringed trousers and immense sombrero hats, tied under their chins.

"Great Scott!" cried a familiar voice. "Here come Jack Ralston and her Indian girl! What a place for a couple of girls to be alone!"

Jack's ears burned. She recognized Dan's tones but was not so much abashed by meeting him, as she was by Frank Kent's astonished face. The young English fellow's surprise was unmistakable.

"May I stay with you until your escort joins you, Miss Ralston?" Frank asked immediately. "The men about here are pretty rough and if you should happen to get too near the cattle it might be dangerous. I am told they sometimes break out and start a stampede."

Jack kept her face turned away while Frank was speaking. She was actually

ashamed to return his friendly gaze. Frank had entirely separated himself from Dan Norton, who was grinning scornfully at Olive and Jack.

"Please don't worry about us, Mr. Kent," Jack said quietly. "We won't get into danger. I don't exactly like to tell you, but we rode over to the round-up by ourselves. You understand that we didn't mean to go near the men or the cattle, but I thought we might find some one we knew near the mess-wagons."

"Come on, Frank Kent," Dan Norton yelled impatiently. "Do you think I have got time to waste while you talk to Jack Ralston all day? I told Laura we would be back with them in half an hour. Hustle."

Frank Kent's face was no longer pale, as it had been when Jack had her first meeting with him on the Ralston Ranch. It had been tanned and reddened by his weeks in the sun and air of Wyoming, but that did not account for the sudden color that flamed in it. "Be quiet, Dan, you cad," he ordered sharply. "Go when you like, I shall stay with Miss Ralston and her friend."

"I say, Miss Ralston," Frank suggested suddenly. "Mr. and Mrs. Simpson are not

very far away. They came over in their automobile, because Mrs. Simpson thought maybe her sister and niece would like to see the cowboys from the different ranches ride up to their work. Gee, they are stunning-looking fellows, aren't they? I wish I were an artist, I would like to paint them. Won't you come over to Mrs. Simpson with me? They are well out of any danger and I know Mrs. Simpson would want you and Miss Olive to join her."

An unregenerate twinkle returned to Jack's eyes. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Kent, I would like awfully to go over and stay with Aunt Sallie. Olive and I feel very strange here alone, but the fact is I deliberately ran away from home to come to the round-up and Olive rode along to protect me. I am ashamed to confess my sin to Mrs. Simpson."

"Nevertheless you had better come," Frank urged, and for once, Jack yielded to another will.

It might have been wiser to have turned back home than to have faced Aunt Sallie and her Eastern relatives, but Jack and Olive could not have ridden to Rainbow Lodge without having something more to eat.

Olive already seemed exhausted. She was quite pale and scarcely lifted her eyes. Jack knew that Olive hated to meet the members of the house party, whom she had not seen since the time when she was rescued from being Miss Laura Post's maid.

"Jack Ralston, the most unlikely place in the world is the most likely place to find you," Mrs. Simpson exclaimed laughingly, as Frank and the two newcomers rode up to her big touring car. "What in the world are you girls doing here?"

"Shall I tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, Aunt Sallie?" Jack demanded, smiling at Mrs. Simpson and bowing to Mrs. Post, Laura and Mr. Simpson. Mrs. Post put up her lorgnettes, as though she were in a box at the opera, to gaze at these extraordinary girls. Their clothes were dusty and their hair showed the effects of their long, morning ride, but turning, Mrs. Post beheld her beloved Laura swathed in a pale pink motor veil and a long fur coat, and breathed a sigh of admiration and relief. Surely her Laura was not in the least like these Western tomboys!

Mrs. Simpson shrugged her handsome

shoulders. "Well, you usually tell the truth, whatever else you do and don't do, Jack," Mrs. Simpson avowed. "I know you have run off, so just stay here and have lunch with me."

Mrs. Simpson was talking to Jack, but she was really interested in Olive. How the girl had changed, in the few weeks since she had seen her: she had always been pretty, but she had lost her look of fear. Her grace and quiet manner showed beyond a doubt that from some source she had a heritage of gentle blood. Mr. and Mrs. Simpson shook hands with Olive very kindly, but Mrs. Post and Laura utterly ignored her. Olive showed no resentment, but Jack was exceedingly provoked.

The girls dismounted and climbed into the automobile. Now and then groups of cowboys would pass by them, jingling their spurs and joking with one another. Olive recognized a number of Indian boys, who had lived in the Indian village, where she had been brought up. Among them, she thought she saw old Laska's son and her supposed brother, Josef.

Mrs. Simpson was worried over Dan's

return to their party. She and Mr. Simpson, and indeed all the ranchmen in the neighborhood, now knew of Mr. Daniel Norton's claim to the ownership of Rainbow Ranch, and his efforts to get it away from the ranch girls. Most of the neighbors deeply sympathized with the Ralston girls. Mrs. Simpson dreaded a meeting between Jack and Dan. She knew they were open enemies and hated each other very sincerely.

But when Dan joined them, Jack showed no trace of ill feeling. She had thought matters over and decided that good manners compelled her to behave as naturally as possible. She had no right to continue a quarrel, when she and Dan were both guests.

Dan Norton was in no such humor. He was furious with Frank for having brought Jack and Olive to Mrs. Simpson, and he was determined to get even with Jack, if he possibly could, for Jim's treatment of him at their last meeting.

Mrs. Simpson had an early lunch, since they meant to return to their ranch in a short time. The tablecloth was spread out on the ground, and unconsciously she placed Laura and Dan next Olive, who made no effort to speak to

them. But Dan whispered something to Laura, immediately they got up and marching to the other end of the line of guests, sat down directly opposite Jack and Frank.

Nobody had much to say. To save her life, Jack could not talk naturally with Dan's sneering face across from her. Mr. and Mrs. Simpson did their best, but the luncheon party was a failure.

Dan was awaiting his opportunity.

"Jack," Mr. Simpson remarked innocently, "Jim Colter tells me that you have recently been losing some of your cattle and young colts. He says that they disappear from your ranch, and when they are seen again they have the brand of another owner on them. That is a pretty bad business. Have you any idea who is responsible for the trouble?"

Jack shook her head desperately. She was determined to say nothing that could make any trouble. "No, Mr. Simpson, we don't know. That is, it don't make any difference. Perhaps we are mistaken," she answered lamely.

Mr. Simpson was puzzled by Jack's manner. There was an awkward silence.

Dan leaned over and whispered to Laura in

a tone that could be distinctly heard, not only by Jack and Frank, but by every member of the small company. "I shouldn't think Jack Ralston would worry about losing a few of her old cattle. She is going to lose something else pretty soon, that is a good deal more important."

Laura snickered nervously. She caught sight of Jack's face.

Mrs. Simpson frowned and glanced hastily at Jack. Mr. Simpson's eyes flashed and he too watched his young girl guest. Jack was distinctly conscious that everybody in the party stared straight at her when Dan ended his insulting speech.

Jack felt herself turn cold all over. Only her face was scorching hot. Half a dozen angry retorts trembled on her lips. She started to speak, but then she turned to Frank and said quietly. "Won't you tell me something more about your home in England? I am awfully interested."

Mrs. Simpson breathed a sigh of relief. Only Laura seemed disappointed. There was nothing she loved half so well as a scene and she fondly believed Dan and Jack meant to treat her to one.

Ten minutes later, Jack went over to Mrs. Simpson. "Aunt Sallie, I think Olive and I had better start back to the ranch now. You were awfully good to give us our luncheon, but we ought to be at home by dark."

Mrs. Simpson caught Jack's hand. "You were a trump, Jack dear," she whispered. "I would like to shake that red-headed boy if I had a chance at him, but I believe somebody else will when you go."

Jack smiled, though her voice trembled a little. "I don't think Dan and I ought to carry on our quarrels at your table, Aunt Sallie," she answered. "But you know if he says anything like that to me again, I should die if I didn't answer him back. So, good-bye."

Jacqueline bowed her farewells and she and Olive started toward their ponies.

Frank Kent had a moment alone with Dan.

"Dan Norton, you have got to settle with me for that speech, you cub," he insisted, in a white passion of anger that startled his host.

Dan thought Frank too much of a gentleman to be willing to fight.

"All right," he rejoined calmly, "choose your own time."

Half way over to their horses, Frank joined Olive and Jack.

"I am going to ride back to your ranch with you, Miss Ralston," Frank announced quietly.

Olive looked relieved, but Jack shook her head firmly.

"You are awfully good, Mr. Kent," Jack protested. "But really Olive and I can go home perfectly well alone. We would rather not trouble you."

Frank assisted Olive on her broncho and then climbed into his own saddle, Jack being already mounted.

"Mr. Simpson thinks I had better go home with you," Frank repeated carelessly. "And I think you might let me act as an honorary escort, because in case you don't I shall simply ride along behind you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

“**J**ACK, don't you think we are going too near the corrals?” Olive inquired timidly.

It was high noon. The cattle had been brought by the cowboys into the open field and each ranchman had divided his own stock from the herds. The animals had been driven into the corrals, separate enclosures made of fence rails, one belonging to each of the neighboring ranches. In the afternoon the branding of the cattle took place, but most of the cowboys had now gone off to get something to eat before the real business of the day began. Only a dozen men guarded the entire stockade.

“Oh, no, Olive,” Jack answered lightly. “I believe, if we ride a little closer, we may get some news of Jim. I would like to see him to ask him some questions, before we start back home.” Jack rode gaily ahead, forgetting her disagreeable scene with Dan Norton. The swarming hundreds of cows and calves, the bright sunshine, the brilliantly

blue sky overhead, the noise and splendid action of the scene interested her tremendously.

"I think Miss Olive is right, Miss Ralston," Frank insisted gravely. "We must not ride too near the stock, for fear of a stampede."

"Just a few feet more," Jack begged, turning half way around in her saddle to glance back at Olive and Frank.

At this moment an immense bull burst out of one of the corrals and made a wild dash across an open field. He was not headed toward Jack, or Olive, or Frank, and there did not appear to be the least danger.

Two of the cowboys made a rush to cut off the bull's charge but turned back a moment later to their companions. It was more important for the men to keep the other animals from following their leader, than to recapture the one infuriated beast.

Jim Colter had warned Jacqueline, when he first gave her the new pony, that "Tricks" was well named. He had told her that she would have to watch the little animal pretty closely, but Jack was a trained rider and so far the mare had not given her any trouble. She had not realized, when she came to the

round-up, that "Tricks" was one of the ponies that had been formerly used by the cow-punchers at the round-ups.

Tricks saw the bull break away from the stockade and make its plunge for freedom at the moment that Jack turned her head and slightly relaxed her hold on the broncho's bridle.

The pony's fighting blood was up. She did not intend to see a bull escape when it was her business as a cowboy's pony, to head him off and turn him back toward the herd. She made a leap forward, running diagonally across the plain, in order to cross in front of the bull at the shortest possible distance. For the first time in her experience, Jack Ralston completely lost control of the horse she was riding; the pony's headlong rush had been too unexpected. Tricks was a good-sized broncho with a will of her own and was convinced that she was doing her duty.

Jack had unfortunately taken off her gloves. People in the West never ride the hard-mouthed little Western ponies, without thick leather gauntlets. She pulled on her reins until they cut into her flesh, but the pony ran on. Still Jack had no idea of not

being able to control her before she got into danger.

No one, except Frank and Olive, saw Jack's wild dash. The cowboys were riding in and out among the corrals, swinging their long ropes and forcing the excited cattle back into their enclosures.

"Get back out of the way," Frank commanded Olive quickly. Almost before she realized what had taken place, Frank Kent was off like a shot after the flying Jack.

His horse pounded along, but Jack was yards ahead. Frank did not know what he could do, if he reached Jack. He could only grasp her bridle and try to stop both of their ponies. At best, if he got ahead of her, he might be able to shut off the bull's mad charge. There would be only one way to do it and that would be to let the animal rush upon his horse. He knew nothing of the cowboys' methods. He had no lasso. He had seen pictures of Spanish toreadors with their flaming scarlet scarfs. If he only had as much as a red handkerchief, perhaps he might divert the bull's course. Of course Frank realized that this would have been a forlorn hope. But nothing really mattered. Jack's

pony continued to gain on his; he had not a fighting chance of overtaking her.

Frank hardly dared look at Jack. He could see so clearly what would happen: the range-bred pony would take her straight in front of the furious bull, not knowing that her rider was not a cowboy and would be unequal to the task of turning the great brute aside. She would do her part and expected Jack to do the rest. Jack did not have so much as a small riding whip in her hand, having lost it in her pony's first plunge ahead. But she now realized her peril; one glimpse of her face would have revealed this. It was white as marble save for the flying, bronze gold of her hair. Her eyes were wide open and almost black and her lips were parted. But there was no give-up in her expression; determination marked every fine cut line.

Jack had considered but two alternatives. Either she must stop her wild pony or drive back the maddened bull. Now she knew she could do neither. She was only a few yards from the bull and understood that an animal in a wild rush for liberty, never turns aside unless he is driven.

Half unconsciously Frank Kent closed his

eyes. Jacqueline Ralston had seemed to him so splendid, typifying to him the free, outdoor life of the great West. He realized that Jack had lots of faults, but that she was the kind of girl who would make a wonderful woman. She was a true American girl, brave, generous and gay. The thought of her being injured, or killed, was horrible. She was the very spirit of youth and energy.

Frank looked again. Jack was going to face death squarely, or else to drive her pony across the bull's course, before it reached her. Yet the last method seemed hopeless, because the pony was master of the race, not Jack. The girl had stooped low in her saddle. Her feet were out of the stirrups and she lay almost flat across the pony's back. She seemed to slip to one side. Frank watched for another horrified second. Jack and her horse were not a hundred feet from the bull.

Then something slid along the ground on the right side of the pony, ran a few feet, let go of the bridle and sat down limply in the brown grass.

Frank shouted as he had never thought it in him to shout. The trick of dropping from her horse that Jack had just effected,

he had seen accomplished once in a Buffalo Bill show in London. The vision of a girl doing it for her own safety was the most thrilling sight he had ever seen in his life.

Tricks, deserted by her rider, and uncertain what she should do alone, sprang to one side as the bull lunged at her, and the danger was all over in an instant.

Frank found Jack shaking like one in a chill. But she smiled at him bravely and put out her hand to let him pull her off the ground.

"Perhaps, Frank," she said, forgetting formalities in her thankfulness, "if I live long enough, I may some day learn to do what I am told. Please take me back to Olive."

Tricks, exhausted by her wild run, was led back to Jack, a weary and repentant pony.

Jack was silent and shaken. She followed Frank back to the spot where they had left Olive, without a word.

The cowboys were returning to the work of branding the cattle and it was high time the ranch girls started for home. But neither Jack nor Frank could find a trace of Olive. She had completely disappeared. They rode over to the spot where they had

lunched with Mr. and Mrs. Simpson, but the automobile party had left for their ranch. Frank inquired of a dozen cowboys. No one of them had seen Olive.

Jack tried not to cry, but the day's experiences had been too much for her. She had never been so utterly wretched before.

"Don't worry, Miss Ralston," Frank urged. "I'll bet you anything that Miss Olive has run across your overseer, Jim Colter, and has returned to Rainbow Ranch with him."

Jack shook her head despairingly. "Olive would not go away without telling me, for anything in the world," she insisted. "Besides, Jim would not leave me here. He is somewhere around, won't you find him?"

Frank insisted that Jack wait in a place of safety a mile farther along the trail toward their ranch. For an hour Jack walked up and down a few yards of barren ground, her pony resting near her. The time seemed an eternity.

By and by Frank arrived with Jim Colter. Jim looked sternly at Jack, but she was past caring what he said or thought of her.

"Can't you find Olive, Jim?" Jack pleaded.

"I'll do my best," Jim returned. "Mr. Kent will take you home to the ranch."

"But I can't go without Olive, Jim. I'll stay here until you find her. She has probably just lost her way." Jack entreated.

"Hope so," Jim repeated shortly. "But in any case, your place is at home."

Jack hesitated.

"Haven't you made enough trouble for yourself and other people already to-day, Jack?" Jim questioned keenly. And Jack submissively bowed her head.

CHAPTER XIX.

NO NEWS.

WEEEKS passed and there was no word from Olive. The ranch girls had almost ceased to talk of her return. They had begun to lose hope.

Immediately after Frank Kent and Jack left him, on the day of the round-up, Jim Colter had gone to the Indian village, but he could find no trace of Olive there. Curiously enough old Laska had disappeared from her hut several days before, so she could scarcely be held responsible for the lost girl. She had said nothing of where she was going nor when she expected to return. In Indian fashion, she had departed silently, carrying only a bundle strapped across her back.

Josef would give no information. Jim tried him with threats and bribes, but the boy insisted he knew nothing of Olive. He had not seen her in many weeks. It was useless to try to make an Indian betray a secret he meant to keep and Jim Colter knew better than to waste his time. The Indian is

as suspicious and reticent to-day as he was in the old days, when no kind of torture ever wrung a sound from him.

Advertisements were inserted in the papers in the nearby towns, but no girl answering to the description of Olive was ever reported. She had vanished as completely as though she were dead. By and by Jim Colter gave up the search. He did not believe that they would ever see the Indian girl again.

Frank Kent kept quietly at work. He was very rich, and without a word to anyone, offered a reward for Olive's return, so large that had Laska seen it and had she had Olive in her possession, she must surely have given her up. Frank came often to Rainbow Lodge. The girls no longer thought of him as the guest and relative of their bitterest enemy, and the name of the Nortons was never mentioned between them. He used to take Jean and Frieda and Cousin Ruth off on long excursions to keep them amused, but Jack would rarely go with them. She seldom left the ranch and spent the greater part of the time alone, refusing to talk either of Olive or the prospect of losing Rainbow Ranch, which loomed nearer with each passing day. Jack was

polite to Cousin Ruth, but she never expressed any penitence to her or to Jim for her wilfulness, which seemed to be responsible for Olive's loss. But daily Jack grew paler and thinner. She seemed much older and quieter than the radiant beautiful girl who had been the ruling spirit of the entire ranch. Everyone who knew her worried over the change in her, and most of all Ruth, who wondered if she were not somehow to blame for the whole disaster. If she had not opposed Jack's going to the round-up, Jim would have taken Jack with him and Olive would not have left the Lodge.

Jean and Frieda bore their troubles differently. Sometimes they would talk of Olive and again of the loss of their home and Jean would weep passionately for a few minutes and Frieda would cry softly. But they would soon cheer up and be convinced of Olive's immediate return and the discovery of the lost deed to the ranch. Jean even suggested that they need not perish if the ranch were taken away from them. She was quite sure she would be able to work and support herself and possibly Frieda. And for once Jack laughed, for, as she ex-

plained to her cousin, she and Jean knew nothing in the world except how to ride horseback, and ranch girls though they were, they could hardly be expected to join a circus.

But no one interfered with Jack. She took her long rides alone in spite of the cold weather, for they seemed to be the only things that would quiet her restlessness. When she was in the house, she was either searching in every conceivable crack and corner for the lost title deed, or else gazing listlessly out of the window.

One clear, frosty morning, Jack came in to an early breakfast, wearing her riding habit.

"You won't mind if I am away from the ranch all day to-day, Cousin Ruth?" she inquired quietly. "I would rather not say where I am going, but I shall be in no danger and I shall be home before dark."

Jean waved her fork pettishly in the air. "What in the world are you up to, Jacqueline Ralston?" she demanded. "Frieda and I awfully wanted you to go over to Aunt Sallie's for the day with us. You knew she had asked us and Cousin Ruth can't go, because she won't learn to ride horseback. I should think you would be tired of mysteries and

secrets by this time, I am sure I am. Rainbow Lodge didn't use to be like this. It is the most changed place I ever saw," Jean sighed mournfully. But Jack made her no answer and waited until Ruth agreed to her request.

By ten o'clock, Ruth Drew was alone at the Lodge. The day began early at the ranch, as the winter twilights soon closed in and there were no lights but the stars to guide the wanderers over the prairies.

Ruth had assured the girls she would not be lonely. She had lots of work to do and letters to be written to the people at home. But somehow Ruth did not feel in the mood for any of her tasks. She was astonished at herself. Already the old village life in the East seemed far away; Rainbow Lodge and the vast, primitive West meant home to her now.

Outdoors the world looked utterly deserted. There was not a leaf, nor a blade of green grass visible, not a human being, nor an animal in sight, except old Shep, who howled dismally at having been left at home by the ranch girls.

Ruth slipped into a heavy old coat and went

for a walk up and down the frozen fields in front of Rainbow Lodge. Old Shep kept close beside her, with his warm nose thrust in her hand. There were many things Ruth wished to think about and it would be easier to see clearly and to know what was best in the open air.

Ruth was exceedingly vexed with the overseer of Rainbow Ranch. What was to become of Frieda, Jean and Jack, in case they were forced to give up their home at the beginning of the New Year? Jack had confided to Ruth that they owned six thousand dollars in bank, beside the stock on their place. But Jack had no ideas for their future, and Mr. Jim Colter had not seen fit to discuss with their chaperon any plans that he might have for the girls. Of one thing Ruth was determined, whatever happened, she would stay with the girls. She had a little money and she could earn her living as a teacher if it were necessary, but the ranch girls should not face the world alone. Nevertheless, Mr. Colter should explain affairs to her more fully. It was all very well for him to argue that Rainbow Ranch could not fall into other hands. He should look at both sides of the

question. Ruth had not seen the overseer, except for a few minutes at a time, since the evening before the round-up. He certainly had not treated her with proper respect.

The longer Miss Ruth Drew thought of her grievances, the angrier she grew. Of course there was nothing personal in the matter, but as the girls' chaperon, she deserved more consideration.

Ruth's cheeks were glowing by this time, partly from the cold air, but quite as much from temper. She had changed a good deal. Her complexion was certainly not sallow. She no longer wore her glasses, except when she wished to read, and her smooth hair was now blowing becomingly about her face under an old felt hat of Jean's carelessly put on.

But Ruth was not being altogether honest with herself; she did have a little private spite against Jim. He had promised to teach her to ride horseback weeks before and he had never referred to the subject again. She dearly wished to learn. She had wanted to ride over to return Mrs. Simpson's call and had only pretended an indifference to Jean, because she did not intend in any way to remind Mr. Colter of his forgotten promise.

Ruth saw Jim riding up the road that led to the Lodge and drawing herself up, gave him a stiff little bow. Of course she had known all along that a cowboy could not be a gentleman, but Jim had struck her as being rather superior, in spite of his bad grammar. However, no man worth the name broke a promise to a woman. Ruth turned her back on the rider and continued her walk with her head in the air.

Jim reined up in front of the frosty young woman. "Good morning," he said in rather an embarrassed fashion.

The lady's manner was not encouraging. "Good morning," she repeated severely, "I suppose you wanted to see one of the girls, but they are all away from the ranch."

Jim shook his head slowly, staring at Miss Ruth Drew with a puzzled frown. He had not the faintest idea why she was so haughty, and clearing his throat, continued to stare at her without a word until the silence grew more and more embarrassing.

Ruth's cheeks grew redder. She was irritated by Jim's silence and the expression of his eyes, which were as blue and direct as a young boy's.

"Do you want to leave a message for one of the girls or to speak to Aunt Ellen or Zack?" Ruth inquired irritably.

But still Jim did not speak.

"For heaven's sake, tell me, what do you want, Mr. Colter?" Ruth demanded. And suddenly Jim laughed.

"Well, I thought I wanted to speak to you, Miss Drew," he drawled in his slow, good-humored fashion. "But perhaps I had better not. I kind of thought maybe you would like me to give you a riding lesson this morning, but I can see now you wouldn't. I have been trying to get one of the ranch ponies broke in for you ever since I heard you wanted to learn to ride and now I have got a little broncho that is just about as gentle as a kitten. But, so long, maybe you'll be feeling more like it another day."

Jim rode calmly away, leaving Ruth looking as young and foolish as a cross child.

She did want a horseback lesson to-day of all days, when she was alone and a little blue. Ruth ran after Jim, entirely forgetting her dignity.

"Mr. Colter, please wait," she called. "I do want to learn to ride, dreadfully, and I

should be awfully glad to have you show me how this morning, if you don't think I would be too much of a chump."

"Chump!" Ruth's ears burned. Jean's favorite word, "chump," had slipped out of her lips as unconsciously as though she had never been a New England school marm with a perfect horror of slang. She wondered if the ranch overseer had noticed her break.

When Jim turned and smiled down on Miss Drew, she was no longer the superior person he had just left.

"You'll learn to like it better in Wyoming, once you can ride," he answered kindly. "Why, when the spring comes, our barren prairies blossom like a rose and the birds are about everywhere. The ranch girls want you to get fond of it out here. There ain't any feeling much worse than being homesick for the things you left behind you. Now run along and rig yourself up in some kind of a riding habit of the girls. I will have the pony waiting by the time you are ready."

Ruth rushed into the house, wondering why she felt so absurdly young and happy all at once.

The young chaperon did not acquire the art

of learning to ride horseback in a single lesson. But Jim was far too sweet-tempered to let her know that she was the hardest pupil he ever tried to teach. Both the master and pupil were elated when Ruth finally managed to sit straight in her saddle, without slipping to either side, and to hold her reins while the pony walked sedately up and down with Jim at his head.

Late that afternoon, Ruth was sitting alone by the living-room window. It was growing dark. The day had been a tiring one and she was feeling a tiny bit depressed. Jack cantered up to the house, gave her pony over to their colored man, and without so much as a glance at Ruth, strode past the living-room into her own room and closed the door behind her.

Ruth sighed. It did seem to her that Jack might have come in to speak to her, thinking that she had been by herself all day. Ruth was beginning to make up her mind that it was an utterly hopeless desire that she and Jack should ever be friends. Jack was so reserved and unapproachable and so bent on having her own way.

Ruth did not expect Frieda and Jean to

return for another hour. Mrs. Simpson had promised to send some one over with them, so they could have a longer visit with her. It was growing spooky in the living-room, with only the dancing shadows of the fire. Aunt Ellen had forgotten to bring in the lamp and Ruth started toward the kitchen down the wide hall.

Outside Jack's door she heard a queer noise that startled her. It was a strange choking sound, as though some one were in pain. Ruth listened. The sound was not repeated, but the room was in perfect darkness and she became vaguely uneasy. She did not understand Jack's disposition. The girl had been so quiet and unhappy since Olive's disappearance and Ruth wondered what Jack was doing in the dark alone.

A knock on the door brought no answer and Ruth tried again.

"What is it?" a stifled voice asked.

"Won't you let me come in, Jack?" Ruth urged, feeling her uneasiness increase.

"I would much rather you wouldn't, I prefer to be alone," Jack replied in her habitual frigid tones. But Ruth heard a queer little catch at the end of her sentence that was unfamiliar.

Ruth had her hand on the doorknob and without waiting for permission she turned it and walked into Jack's room. "I think it is my duty to come in to you, Jack," she explained, in her self-righteous, lady-governess tones that Jack so much disliked.

The room was in almost total darkness and Ruth could catch only a faint outline of Jack's figure, drawn up in its usual proud pose. But to-night her head was drooping. The fire had burned out in the grate, except for a few colored ashes, but Ruth found paper and wood and soon brought it to a blaze. She said nothing and Jack neither moved nor spoke. But Ruth caught one glimpse of Jack's face, when the firelight leaped up into the room.

She found an old eiderdown wrapper in the closet and pushed a low chair near the fire, putting the warm grey gown over Jack's rigid shoulders and pushing her softly toward the chair.

"There, dear, sit down by the fire," Ruth said gently. "I did not mean to intrude on you and I will leave you by yourself, but you must try and not let yourself get ill because you are miserable. There may be a lot, you know, that you must do for Frieda and Jean."

Ruth could see that Jack had lost her self-control and was trembling with nervousness and cold, and turned to leave her, but Jack held out a shaking hand.

"Please don't go yet, Ruth," she pleaded, as though she were one girl talking to another. "There is something I want to try to tell you if I can."

Ruth sat quietly down. She realized all at once how much harder it is for some people to say the things they feel, than it is for others.

"It's about Olive," Jack declared after an instant. "I have been over to the Norton ranch to-day. I brought myself to ask a favor of Mr. Norton. I asked him to let me speak to the Indian boy, Josef, who works on his ranch. Mr. Norton consented, if I would allow him to stay in the room while I talked. Of course he thought I wanted to play him some trick about the ranch." Jack spoke indifferently. "I offered Josef everything I had in the world, a hundred dollars father once gave me and my share of my mother's jewelry, if he would only tell me what had become of Olive. He wouldn't tell." Jack shook her head despairingly. "I am beginning to believe Olive is dead."

"I don't think so, Jack, somehow, though I don't know," Ruth returned gravely.

"I suppose there is something I ought to say to you, Cousin Ruth," Jack continued quietly. "I ought to tell you and Jim that I am sorry that I went off to the round-up against your wishes. Of course I am sorry, it seemes almost foolish for me to speak of it. I don't want to ask you to forgive me, because of course I shall never think of forgiving myself for losing Olive, no matter how long I live."

Ruth took hold of Jack's cold fingers. Jack spoke with perfect self-control, but Ruth began dimly to understand something of her disposition.

All at once, Jack's calmness gave way. She began to sob, as though she were torn in pieces. "Oh, Cousin Ruth, won't Olive come back ever? I used to think that having to give up our ranch would be the most dreadful thing that could happen, but now I don't. Olive was so gentle and so timid. I thought I was going to protect and take care of her as though she were Frieda, but instead of that it was I who led her into danger."

Ruth and Jack talked quietly after this,

until Jean and Frieda came home. Ruth had entirely lost her school-teacher manner and forgot to preach.

Jack's reserve having once broken down, she told Ruth all she had suffered in silence for the past few weeks.

Though Ruth and Jack might have many conflicts of their two strong wills in the future, they would never misunderstand each other so completely as they had done in the past.

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SOMEONE CREPT UP BEHIND HER WITH THE STEALTHINESS
POSSIBLE ONLY TO AN INDIAN.

CHAPTER XX.

OLIVE.

ON the day when Jacqueline Ralston's pony ran away so unexpectedly, and Frank Kent commanded Olive to get out of danger, Olive had watched them both for a few minutes in a kind of daze. She had then moved slowly backward, keeping them both in sight, until she dimly saw Jack's leap from her horse. She then continued alone along the trail which she and Jack had traveled that morning, until the men and the cattle at the round-up were entirely out of sight, supposing that Frank and Jack would follow her as soon as they crossed the field.

Olive stopped her horse finally. She was not looking about her, nor thinking of anything in particular except her joy in Jack's safety. She heard no sound.

Someone crept up behind her with the stealthiness possible only to an Indian. Suddenly Olive felt her hands drawn behind her and she was forcibly dragged from her horse.

Two or three times only she cried for help,

but before she could do more, a handkerchief was tied tightly about her lips and she was half dragged and half carried to one of the very tents which she and Jack had passed that morning on their way to the fateful round-up.

Old Laska sat stolidly smoking a pipe. "Ugh," she grunted, but her small, beady eyes flashed like coals in the sunlight.

Although Olive was the last person she expected to see at such a moment, she took the girl from Josef without a word, and held her so that she could not get away. Josef disappeared immediately. He must have gone to hide Olive's pony from sight.

Olive struggled, but she could make no outcry, and in a little while Laska bound her so that she could scarcely move. The girl was a captive inside the tent at the moment when Frank Kent and Jack passed it, unheeding, on their return to Rainbow Lodge.

The Indian woman and her son had not thought to capture Olive at such a time and place. But they had vowed to get hold of her by any means they could. From the instant Josef discovered that Olive had come to the round-up, he had not lost sight of her and when he found her alone, he was ready.

All afternoon she lay in the tightly closed tent with Laska, neither one of the women moving, Olive being in a stupor from terror and pain. By and by, when the dusk fell, Josef appeared silently at the tent entrance, leading Olive's pony and a horse for his mother. He bound Olive to her horse, and the two women set off across the prairies, Laska with her bundle across her back and two jugs of water swung over her saddle.

Through all the long, cold night, Laska traveled across the barren plains with her hand on Olive's bridle. At first there were shadowy fences that marked the division of one ranch from another. These were soon lost and the way lay through a trackless waste, unbroken by a trail of man or animal. Laska had gone into the desert where there was no drop of pure water.

In the morning the Indian woman rested, built a fire, untied Olive and fed her, knowing that if the girl ran away from her now she would not be able to go back the way they had come. She must be lost and could not fail to perish from hunger and thirst. Still Laska guarded her closely.

On the morning of the third day of their

journeying, Olive saw on the far horizon some curling wreaths of smoke. . Nearer there were a few lean horses grazing on the scanty sage grass. A dozen Indian tepees were set up in what seemed a small oasis in the desert. She knew that Laska had brought her to the winter quarters of a small band of Indians who would not stay in a village overlooked and regulated by the United States Government. These Indians lived the old nomad life, wandering from place to place, setting up their tents like gypsies, wherever they could remain unmolested.

Olive almost gave up hope. Here in the wilderness she would never come in contact with any one from the outside world. When the spring came, the Indians would gather up their belongings and wander farther away, taking her with them, where she could have no chance of return.

Laska and Olive had a tent of their own. In it they lived for some time, rarely speaking to one another. Nobody was unkind to her and for some reason Laska left her alone. It was growing bitterly cold and the old woman used to sit smoking all day by the fire, either in her own wigwam or one nearby.

She did not try to watch Olive, knowing that she could not get away. Laska had told her that she should never leave the Indians again; that they would return no more to the neighborhood of the white men and Olive seemed quietly to accept her fate. Even Laska, who had trained the girl in her own school of silence, was deceived by her. She thought that Olive no longer cared enough to go back to dare the perils of the trip.

At first it did appear utterly impossible to Olive. She had not the faintest idea in what direction she and Laska had traveled and on arriving among the Indians, her pony had been taken away from her. She had no food except the little bit she was allowed each day, barely enough to live on and knew that at any time now, the swift and bitter snowstorms of the prairies might fall. Any traveler caught out in one of them would surely perish and not be found until the snow melted.

There were many hours, when Olive thought she would run away anyhow and take whatever fate came to her. But the memory of Jack, and Jean and Frieda, Cousin Ruth and Rainbow Lodge sustained her. A little time before and she had not known any happi-

ness. Now the thought of the joy she would feel if she ever got home again, gave her patience and courage to wait.

Few of the older Indians paid much attention to the captive. Whatever story old Laska had told them, they had accepted without question. They spoke very little English and rarely stirred, except when the men went off on long hunting expeditions to return with whatever deer they managed to slay.

Olive had only one friend, one person, with whom she talked in the weeks she spent in the Indian camp. This was Carlos, a young Indian boy, about twelve years old. He was as slender and straight as a young pine tree, the fastest runner, the best rider and shot in the tribe. She had paid little attention to the boy at first, but he followed her like a shadow. Often when she came out of her tent, she would find him sitting like a brown image on the cold ground. The boy was like an Eskimo and appeared to feel neither hunger nor frost.

One day Olive set out for a walk. She did not wish Carlos to go with her, but before she had gone many rods the boy appeared at her

side and quietly marched beside her, looking neither to the right nor the left.

"Go back, Carlos," Olive commanded quietly.

The boy shook his head. "You travel not alone over the prairies, you do not know your way," he answered stolidly.

Olive's patience gave out. She seized the boy by the shoulders, tears came into her soft black eyes and her face quivered. "You are hired to spy on me, Carlos," she said accusingly. "I thought I had one friend in you."

Again Carlos shook his head. "Why should I spy on you?" he asked. "What is it you would do?"

Then Olive told the boy what had happened to her.

Very quietly he listened. "I knew you were not of our people," he answered. "I will find the way for you to get back home. You are a woman and timid. Have faith in me."

Olive smiled, and from this day she called the Indian boy, "Little Brother," but she had no hope of his helping her and she saw him far less often. Carlos was away from the camp nearly every day, returning with

rabbits that he shot on the plains. Olive saw him drying the skins and sometimes he brought her their meat to eat, but he never referred to his promise to show her a way of escape from the Indian camp.

The days were long, but the nights were far longer and the long twilights the saddest time of all. Olive sat often in the tent alone.

One evening Laska had departed earlier than usual to the wigwam of a neighboring squaw and Olive was huddled up on the dry grass in front of their fire, trying to keep from freezing. The air was filled with smoke. The girl looked scornfully at the two beds of straw, covered with coarse Indian blankets, where she and Indian Laska slept. Before her eyes came the vision of the splendid living-room at Rainbow Lodge. She could see the ranch girls and their cousin before the great fire and wondered if they ever thought of her now. Olive did not know how long a time had passed since she was stolen.

Sticking out from under Laska's bed was the bundle which she had borne on her back across the plains. Until this moment she had kept it hidden from Olive, except during their trip, when she had gotten their food from it.

Olive was not particularly interested in her discovery. But it occurred to her that this bag might have something to eat in it, which would aid her, if she could manage to get away. She drew out the dirty sheepskin bag and thrust her hand into it, shuddering at the things she touched. There were some odd bits of soiled clothing and a small package, tied up in an old, red cotton handkerchief. Olive had seen the package in the handkerchief before, in Laska's hut in the village. But she had never been interested to find out what it contained. To-night she cared for anything that would break the monotony of the long hours ahead of her.

Olive looked cautiously at the tent opening. The place was entirely still. There was not a sound in the lonely tepee, save the blowing of the winter winds across the desert. The girl crawled to a spot where the fire cast its brightest glow. Patiently she worked at the hard knots in the handkerchief. There was a roll of money in it tied up with a cord. Olive tossed the money impatiently aside. What use was money to her in this wild land? Olive had known always that Laska got money from some unknown source. She

always had more than the other Indians in their village, and Jack had explained to Olive that this money was sent to Laska for taking care of her. Olive searched for a bit of paper, something to show from what place or from whom this money came. But there was no scrap of anything of that sort.

Beside the money, there was a small box in the handkerchief. It was of delicate, carved wood and smelled very sweet. Olive saw at once that the carving had never been made by Indians. It was far too fine.

She was so intent on opening this box that she did not hear a stealthy noise just outside her tent.

The lid of the sandalwood chest slid gently off. Inside, Olive beheld some trinkets, which she knew in a moment of swift rapture, must belong to her. One was a curiously wrought old silver chain, with a beautiful cross hanging from it. A watch, large enough to belong to a man, had a girl's picture painted in it which made Olive catch her breath. The picture she knew looked like her, only it was far lovelier. This girl had the same brilliant yet soft black eyes, the same straight, glossy hair and the deep, olive

coloring. She was not an American, but Olive knew there was no trace of Indian blood in this woman. Whatever Indian blood ran in Olive's veins, she guessed she must have inherited from her father. Beside the watch and chain, the carved box held but one more treasure. It was a little book about four inches square, written in a language that Olive could not understand.

The noise at the tent opening grew more distinct. Some one was peering through a tiny opening, yet Olive seemed to have neither eyes nor ears. Her face was flushed with happiness and she held the odd, sweet-smelling box close against her cheek.

Someone entered the tent. At last Olive awakened and springing to her feet, thrust her treasures inside her dress. With her eyes flaming, she turned to face her enemy; for Olive had not lived all her life among nearly savage people without learning something from them. She meant to fight now to save her possessions, as a real Indian girl would have fought to the last moment of her strength.

But instead of the ugly face of old Laska staring at her, Olive saw the slight figure of Carlos, the Indian boy.

Olive held out her treasures eagerly. "Look what I have found," she exclaimed. "I know they must be mine."

The Indian boy regarded the pieces of jewelry gravely. To him they appeared like any other trinkets that the Indians loved.

"I have come to tell you how you may return to your white friends," Carlos announced proudly. "I told you that a man would find a way. It is only women who give up."

Olive shook her lovely head, her thoughts still dwelling with her discovery. She did not understand exactly what the Indian lad said.

He caught at her dress and pulled it impatiently. "Listen, woman. I have found a way for you to get back to your ranch-land. Do you hear me, or is it that you have changed your mind like all women and do not now wish to go?"

Olive laughed. It was so funny to hear this small boy take the patronizing tone with her that the men of his race used toward all women. She put her arm about him and drew him down on the floor by her. The flickering lights of the fire played on the two dark heads, her hair fine and soft as silk, his stiff and straight as a young colt's mane.

"Of course I want to go back to my friends, Little Brother," Olive sighed. "But let's don't talk of that to-night, I want to be a little bit happy in thinking that I have found something that must once have belonged to my mother."

But the boy would not be persuaded. "We must talk of your getting away to-night, for the time is ready," Carlos declared, in the solemn tone of a young Indian chief making ready for battle. "You know I have been out on the prairies for many days together and no one knew where or for what I had gone. I have wandered in many directions seeking for the home of some white man, for I know that however much the Indian pretends he is in a wilderness, he is always to-day on the border of the white man's land."

"Well, have you found a friend to help me?" Olive demanded fervently.

"I have found no friend," Carlos replied, refusing to be hurried or disturbed. "But I have found an iron trail that stretches across the desert. It must bring you to where the white people dwell."

"An iron trail," Olive repeated wonderingly. "I am afraid, I don't know what you mean."

The boy gazed at her with slow, unmoved patience. "It has an iron carriage on it that flies along the trail more swiftly than any horse can run," Carlos explained. "There is great heat and noise and smoke like a prairie fire."

Olive caught the boy's hand in hers. "You mean an engine and a railroad track, don't you, Little Brother?" she queried. "You have seen a train somewhere out on the desert. You will take me to it and somehow I will find people to help me to get back to Rainbow Lodge." Olive flung her arms about Carlos and hugged him as she might have hugged Frieda. She poured out such a flood of questions, that the boy was convinced he was right in his scorn of her sex, but he listened with deep gravity.

"I do not know all things," he replied finally. "Only I have laid all day on the ground near the trail. I know the hour when the iron carriage passes over it. The walk is a long one, but if you will follow me, I will take you there. I will come for you to-night just before the dawn breaks. When you hear an owl hoot, you will know that Carlos is outside your door. You will creep softly,

so that we may have several hours before old Laska wakes. I will bring food and the skins of many wild rabbits that I have sewed together in the evenings, that you may not freeze."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WAY OF ESCAPE.

IN the darkness Olive kept tight hold of Carlos' hand. They ran swiftly and softly, like frightened hares, each moment dreading to hear footsteps behind them. But the darkness hid their tracks and a wind was blowing, which shifted the sand and whirled it into hills and hollows, so that not even an Indian could find the print of any passing foot. Besides, old Laska slept soundly and she had not stirred when Olive stole out from her tent.

Carlos marched toward the east, where the sky looked less dark, until the cold dawn broke. Before the sun was well up the boy saw something glinting and glimmering ahead of them like a long steel serpent. He gave a cry of victory. Breaking away from Olive, Carlos ran ahead. For a moment he stood balancing himself on the track rails, waving his thin brown arms and crowing like a young chanticler.

"We will rest here by the iron trail," he

announced happily. "I will build a fire and we will eat. By and by the great wagon will pass by, roaring and snorting like an angry buffalo. It will take you with it." For a moment the boy's face clouded. Then, as Olive reached his side, he laughed at the thought of her joy.

"But, Carlos," Olive whispered. She was weary and almost frozen from her long tramp across the plains. "You have brought me to the railroad track, but where is the station? Did you not know that the white man's trains will not stop unless there is a little house set up by a wooden platform, where a man at a window sells you small squares of paper?"

Carlos shook his head in confusion. He had no idea what Olive was talking about, for he had never seen a railroad depot in the twelve years of his wandering life. But he saw Olive's disappointment and knew that something in his beautiful plan for his friend was wrong.

"Never you mind, girl," Carlos insisted, shaking his straight, black hair, like a little foreign king, "I will see that the wagon stops for you here, where we wait."

Olive dropped down on the ground, too tired to argue or to explain any further. Carlos ran along the track, finding a few odd sticks and pieces of wood. He made a little fire, into which he stuck one long stick, like a staff, which he had carried from the camp; but he saw that only the end of it burned.

Hungrily Olive ate. She believed that she must follow the railroad track until she came to a depot. She had no way of guessing how many more miles she must walk, nor how many trains passed over this iron pathway through the desert; but she did know that she must save whatever strength she had, as her only hope was to reach a city somewhere. She had not Carlos' faith, that the train would take her straight into the arms of her beloved friends, yet she knew that once in a town, she could probably find a way of communicating with them.

Carlos and Olive did not dare to talk. Olive was listening for the sound of a horse's hoofs, knowing that the journey, which had been so long on foot, could be made on horseback in a little while, if old Laska ever guessed the route they had taken. But

Carlos listened for a louder noise and one to him far less familiar.

The boy and girl heard it at the same instant and both sprang to their feet. Olive's face grew white and rigid with disappointment; but the boy's eyes flashed with excitement. The train was coming along the track past the spot where Olive and Carlos rested. Olive feared that her only chance of escape for that day was gone. She had hoped to reach a depot before a train went by them.

Nearer the roar of the engine sounded. It was in sight far off across the desert, but a very few minutes brought it close.

Olive stepped quickly back to be out of danger and seized Carlos by his woolen shirt to drag him with her. The boy jerked away, and before Olive could dream what he intended to do, he grabbed his burning stick from the fire. "I'll stop the train for you," he shouted valiantly. "Only be quick. You must get on when I command it."

Like a flash, the brave, brown figure ran along the track, waving his tiny torch and facing with all his feeble strength the great monster of iron and steel that was driving toward him. The blood of many centuries of

Indian chiefs must have been back of little Carlos. He dared the unknown force of this engine to-day, as his ancestors had the bullets and powder of their white enemies, with the same blind belief in his own power against the forces of civilization.

Olive saw Carlos go, with a feeling of sickening horror. The boy was so small, so stupidly audacious. Olive's, "Come back, come back!" was lost in the noise of the train, but Carlos would not have heeded her. What Indian chief has ever obeyed a woman? There seemed to be but one fate for him,—he would be crushed to death in an instant.

The engineer saw the boy running toward his train, and the fire which Olive and Carlos had built near the track. He had but one thought: there must be danger somewhere ahead of them and these children had come to warn him.

Fortunately for Carlos, the train which he had chosen for Olive's escape was not one of passenger coaches, but a freight train. The engine was going at far less speed, and quickly slowed down and stopped.

"Come, come, Olive," the boy shouted

triumphantly, this time waving his burning stick like a conquering hero.

Olive ran toward the car, dazed, breathless, hardly knowing what had taken place, nor what she was doing. The Indian boy's spirit had somehow seized hold on the situation.

"What has happened, imp?" the engineer roared out of his car window. "Is something wrong ahead on the track?"

Carlos danced up and down, as though he did not understand what the engineer asked. He had only a dim idea of the man's meaning as he knew so few English words. Olive was slipping by him and Carlos saw that she meant to do what he had planned. The engineer was climbing out of his cab, his back being turned, so that he did not see Olive swing herself up into the next car. In an instant the girl had hidden herself in the midst of great piles of boxes, unobserved by the other trainmen, who were also interested in Carlos.

The engineer was determined to find out what the Indian lad had to tell him. If the boy had fooled him and there was nothing for them to fear ahead, he should get the punishment he deserved.

Carlos guessed the engineer's meaning from the expression of his face. The boy made a dart that was almost as swift as the first plunge of an arrow from a bow. He was a small brown spot some distance off, when the engineer made up his mind to run after him. The man did run for a few rods, but the idea of catching the boy was ridiculous. He was like a breath of wind, blowing this way and that across the prairie. He could lead the engineer off into the desert, so that he would not know how to return, and the man realized this. He climbed slowly back into his engine, determined to watch out himself for trouble along the track; believing, however, that Carlos had played an ugly trick on him. It would have gone hard with Olive if she had been discovered at this time.

The train went tardily on. Olive could hear the men moving on the top of the coach over her head. Once or twice a dirty-faced trainman stuck his head in the open door of the freight car, but he saw nothing of the frightened girl huddled between the boxes. Olive of course had no knowledge of where she was going. Her plan was to

crawl out of the car as soon as it stopped at a town and then try to find some one to help her.

But the car did not stop and Olive finally fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXII.

A VOICE IN THE NIGHT.

A ROUGH voice aroused Olive. She sprang up in terror and stood pressed close against the piled up freight in the car. It was an odd-looking figure she made, as though she had stepped out of a world several hundred years younger than the present one. The coarse man who watched her dimly felt it.

The girl's shoes were ragged and hardly covered her slender feet, her skirt was torn and old. Over her shoulders hung a strange fur garment, shapeless, save that a hole had been cut in the center for her head. Her beautiful black hair was braided and one long plait hung over each shoulder; her head was uncovered and her delicate face, with its pointed chin, was deathly pale. She was trembling. Dark shadows encircled her great black eyes and there was a look not of defiance but of pleading in them.

So picturesque a passenger had never before stolen a ride on a modern freight train.

She belonged to the days of the pioneer settlers in the new land of America.

"How did you come here?" the man demanded gruffly.

Olive's voice shook. She had thought it would be easy to tell her story, if she could only get away from the Indians, but this fierce man frightened her more than any one of them could have done. What must she say? Where could she begin with the tale of her misfortunes.

"I stole in, when the train stopped a while ago, I don't just know when," Olive answered vaguely. She could not tell how long she had been asleep.

"Then you'll git out the next time it stops, young Missie," the trainman announced harshly. "I'd put you off right now, but we are already behind time, because of a rascally Indian boy a piece up the road. Better stay hid and not let our engineer catch sight of you, or he'd make it good and hot for you. Maybe he would turn you over to the police."

Olive could not realize it, but her appearance had already touched her discoverer. She crouched in her corner again and bowed

her head in her slim brown hands, as she had the day when the ranch girls brought her out of Frieda's cave. She did not try to defend herself.

The trainman climbed up on a box and sat whittling a stick and watching Olive out of a pair of shrewd Irish blue eyes. He was not a fierce man. He had a wife and five tow-headed children, living in one of the little frame shacks along the line of the railroad. The man was clever enough to see that Olive was not an ordinary thief or impostor.

"Are you sick, girl?" the man inquired, surprised by Olive's silence.

The girl shook her head. "Oh, no, I am not sick, thank you," Olive answered gently, "but I am very tired. I ran away from an Indian encampment before dawn to-day. Would you mind telling me where this train is going?"

Little by little Olive told the whole history of her strange life to the Irishman, who sat on the box in the freight car and never ceased his whittling for a moment.

"By St. Peter!" he muttered, when Olive finished replying to his last question. "This girl tells a story that might have come out of a

poetry or a history book. The funny thing is, her story must be true! Oh, well," he announced to himself, not to Olive, "there is one thing certain. Nobody can ever make up in their heads such all-fired queer things as happen every day."

But the man had not answered Olive's question as to where this train was going. She had not the courage to ask him again.

By and by Olive saw little houses along the road and knew that their train was nearing a small, western town. She got up and touched the Irishman timidly on the arm. "May I get off at the station myself, please?" she begged. "You won't have to put me off."

The man shook his head severely. "No, you are not going to get off yourself," he returned gruffly, "and I ain't going to put you off either. If you can keep on making yourself small, and you are a pretty thin kind of a girl, I am going to take you farther down the road with us. I have an idea this here freight train will run along somewhere near Wolfville in the course of the afternoon. You have had such bad luck in the past, Missie, that maybe your luck has changed. Anyhow, when you butted blindly into this freight car,

you found a coach going in just about the way you needed to travel. Don't worry your head any more about what you are to do. I'll put you off at Wolfville, and though it looks a bit cloudy, as though it might mean to blow up a bit of snow, I expect you'll manage to get back to the Ralston Ranch, somehow, before night."

Olive, satisfied that this kind-hearted stranger would look out for her, dozed on, half waking and half sleeping. Neither she nor her new friend knew how exhausted she was. She had passed through several weeks of dreadful hardship, exposure and unhappiness, and now she felt too happy to think or care because her head ached dully, and her legs shook so she could hardly stand on them. She would be home soon with Frieda and Jean and Jack!

Several hours went by. The trainman left the car and attended to his duties. But Olive had entire faith that he would not forget her.

At a little past five o'clock in the afternoon the freight train came to a stop near the little town of Wolfville, which was only a matter of ten miles from Rainbow Ranch. The wind

was blowing with a queer, ominous rattling sound and a few flakes of snow were falling.

Olive's new friend gazed at her a little queerly, as he lifted her out on the platform. There were no people in sight except the station master, for it was almost dark and the stopping of a freight train was of little interest.

"Sure you know how to get to your friends from here?" the Irishman asked Olive. She took time to nod and wave her hand, then ran swiftly away from the station in the direction of Rainbow Ranch.

If Olive had gone into the town, someone would have driven her to the Lodge, or else sent word to Jim Colter or the Ralston girls that she was in safe-keeping for the night. A prairie snowstorm was approaching and few people would have cared to trust themselves to a ten-mile drive at this hour of the winter evening.

But Olive did not think of further danger. Ten miles seemed to her to be so near home that she could not bear a second's delay in trying to reach there. For the first few miles she ran swiftly along, as she knew the trail and it was not too dark to follow it. The stinging

wind cut her face and at times the snow blinded her. But the distance was only a short walk for a girl who had spent all her life out of doors in the great West. Yet Olive should have known what a snowstorm in Wyoming, with a heavy pall of gray clouds and a scudding blast, meant.

After a while, her feet in her worn shoes felt like wooden pegs stumping on the frozen earth. Her hands had lost all feeling, although she managed to draw the rabbit-skin furs that Carlos had given her, over her head and to keep her hands under them. The snow no longer fell in flakes but in white sheets, lashed and driven by the force of the storm.

The trail across the plains to the Ralston Ranch was quickly hidden. Mountains of snow piled up in front of Olive, deep gullies appeared at her feet, where the land was usually as level as a table, and she had no idea in which direction she should try to travel. But she fought her way on, thinking perhaps that another wanderer might overtake her, or that she might catch a glimpse of the lights of some ranch house. If she could find an objective point ahead of her, she felt that she

might get to it. But to move blindly in a circle of snow, brought no hope of any relief.

Yet Olive knew she must keep moving if she wished to live. She did not suffer the same agony from the cold, that she had at first. The wind blew her about, as though she had been a bit of paper. She staggered and fell in the snowdrifts, got up and pressed on wishing that even a wild animal would scurry past her on the way to its retreat. But animals are always wiser than human beings before the approach of a storm. Every head of cattle, every horse on the plains, every beast in the forest had found a rude shelter. Olive felt herself entirely alone in a savage, white world.

But in quiet natures like Olive's, there is a wonderful power of resistance. She had endured so much, she had learned the fortitude that comes with misfortune.

She prayed silently through the hours she struggled. There were moments when she believed she spied the light of Rainbow Lodge gleaming on the cruel surface of the snow. She would fight her way to this place, only to discover that her own blind desire had led her astray.

Night came on, but there was little change from the twilight. The few stars that broke through the clouds only made the way more blinding.

Olive's patience, Carlos' planning seemed to have been in vain.

Again Olive dreamed she saw some lights ahead of her. Her mind was no longer clear. She could not remember why she was out alone in the snow. She cried for Jack, when she had the strength, but the tears froze on her face.

Olive reached out her arms toward her vision of the lights of Rainbow Lodge. She was either too blind or too utterly spent to see the snowbank in front of her, as suddenly it shut out her mirage of home. The girl gave a cry of despair with all the feeble strength that was left in her and tumbled headlong into the cold embrace of the snow. But the snow was no longer cold. It was strangely warm and she was shut away from the cruel winds.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JACK IS HAPPY.

“CHILLUNS, it’s time for bed,” Cousin Ruth announced softly. “Frieda has been asleep in my arms for the last ten minutes. Perhaps I can tumble her in bed without waking her, she is so frightened at the storm.”

Jean glanced up at the clock over the living-room mantle. “Do let’s wait a little while longer?” she begged. “I am just at the most thrilling part of my book and I am bound to finish it before I go to bed. Jack, you stay here with me, if Cousin Ruth is going with Frieda. I don’t like to sit up alone. This storm is a terror! Listen how the wind howls down the chimney. I hope our stock won’t be frozen to death to-night.”

Ruth led Frieda gently out of the sitting-room while Jack got up and wandered to the window. But the frost covered the glass. She scratched a little space away with a hair-pin, but there was nothing to see outside save the snow.

Jack walked restlessly up and down the

room for a minute. It was just nine o'clock and she did not feel like going to bed. She could not read as Jean was doing. These terrible western storms, that came once or twice every winter, always filled her with foreboding. Jack was too good a rancher not to understand that they caused great suffering and loss among the cattle. The rude corrals, which the ranchmen built for their stock, could not save them on a night like this.

Jack dropped down on her knees before their book shelves and began to look over the collection of volumes that had once belonged to her father. The books were the same ones that Jean had found in her uncle's trunk and brought to the living-room to impress their new governess on the day of her arrival at Rainbow Lodge. Shep got up from his warm place by the fire and trotted over to lie down by Jack, seeming to know that she was worried and wishing to offer her his subtle sympathy.

Jack turned over the pages of half a dozen books, shaking them, so that every leaf fluttered apart.

Jean glanced over at her cousin. Jack was quieter and older than ever to-night. "What

are you doing, Jack, want me to help you?" Jean asked lovingly.

"No, Jean, I am not doing anything special," Jack replied quietly. "I am just killing time."

But Jean knew that her cousin was searching once more for the lost title deed to Rainbow Ranch and she had gone to the window to gaze out on the snow with the thought of Olive on her mind. Even light-hearted Jean sighed. It was only a few days before Christmas.

Jack was getting up off the floor, when a sound startled her. She jumped quickly to her feet. Old Shep gave a long howl.

"What is the matter with you, Jacqueline Ralston?" Jean demanded pettishly, partly because she had just been so sorry for Jack. "You almost scared me out of my wits."

Jack was pointing toward the window. "I heard a noise outside in the snow," she exclaimed excitedly.

"You did no such thing, Jack, it's only the wind howling. It has been making a racket for the last four hours. I don't see why you are so surprised all of a sudden. I heard nothing unusual," Jean protested.

"But it wasn't the wind I heard, Jean. This noise was quite different. Shep heard it too, see how queerly he is acting," Jack argued.

Old Shep had gone to the front door of the ranch house and was stretched against it with his fore paws resting on the door.

"Well, if you didn't hear the wind, it is some animal that has seen the lights in the Lodge and stolen near here for protection. Do sit down, Jack, you make me dreadfully nervous, staring like that. You know you haven't heard the sound a second time. Let's go to bed."

Jean slipped her arm about Jack's waist, but Jack pushed her gently off. "I am going out in the snow to find out what that cry meant, Jean," Jack announced decisively. "Suppose it was an animal, I can't allow anything to die just outside our home to-night."

Jean clung to her cousin's skirts. "You shan't go out that door, Jack," Jean avowed. "You will be blown off your feet by the wind. You will be frozen. If a wild animal has come out of the woods for shelter, you'll be torn to pieces." Jean pictured every horrible fate that she could imagine overtaking

Jacqueline. But Jack was quickly buttoning up her overcoat and tying a thick woolen scarf about her head.

"I won't stay out but a minute, Jean dear," she returned. "Shep will go with me. He will keep me from getting hurt."

"I'll call Cousin Ruth, Jack, you are the most obstinate person in the world!" Jean exclaimed passionately, but Jack had wrenched open the big front door of the ranch house, and plunged out into the night. A gust of snow swept into the wide hall. Straining with all her might, Jack closed the door back of her, so that Jean should not feel the fury of the storm. With Shep by her side, Jack faced the white wilderness of snow.

Jean ran down the hall toward Ruth's room, but Ruth had already heard the noise and joined her. For an instant the two women awaited Jack's return. They believed that she would come into the house as soon as she saw what lay ahead of her.

Jack seized the lantern, that swung always above the door of their Lodge. The light was out, but by crouching down and turning her back to the wind, Jack managed to re-light it. She knew the light would soon blow

out again, but for a minute it would serve a purpose.

Jack climbed off the porch. Shep ploughed in front of her. Jack swung her lantern once, twice it flashed, then the wind blew it out.

But in that space of time she saw something dark in a mound of snow not far from the house. Jack felt her way toward it, guided by an overwhelming instinct. Shep shook all over, not with the cold, but with the foreknowledge of what was ahead of them.

When Jack reached Olive, Shep had already covered the still body with his own warm one. Jack pushed Shep away. She had to feel under the drifting snow before she knew the object she touched was a human being, but it was not until her hand touched the delicate frozen face, that she realized that Olive was found at last.

Jack's cry for help brought Ruth, Jean, and from the kitchen, Aunt Ellen and Zack. There was such agony in Jack's tones, that they all believed some horrible thing had happened to her.

The women got Olive inside the house, not one of them having an idea that she was alive, but no one dared to tell Jack so. They

stripped off the girl's clothes and found the little sandal-wood box hidden inside her dress.

If Jack had not already learned to love Ruth Drew, she would have begun to care for her to-night. For Ruth knew exactly what to do for Olive. She would not let the girls and Aunt Ellen carry Olive too near the fire. She sent Uncle Zack off to find Jim Colter. Ruth and Jack rubbed Olive's stiff body with snow, until their hands felt almost as numb as hers and forced hot tea between her clenched teeth. By and by Aunt Ellen and Jean were allowed to bring warm blankets and hot irons.

At last the blue, stark look left Olive's face. It was Jack who discovered a tiny bit of color in her lips. Jack flung herself on her knees and hardly knowing what she was doing, breathed all the warm, vibrant breath of her own vigorous body into Olive's almost frozen lungs.

After another hour, Olive stirred and moved one hand. She half opened her black eyes. "I am all right, Jack," she whispered. "I have got home at last."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

"IT'S the most beautiful one we have ever had, Jim; I'm so glad," Jack declared happily.

Jim beat the snow from his coat and folded his arms proudly. "It took all day to get it, Jack, but it's worth it. Where are the other girls?"

Jim Colter and Jacqueline were standing at the base of a wonderful pine tree, whose top pressed against the ceiling of the living-room at Rainbow Lodge. The frost still clung to the tree and the snow and icicles melted into long chains of diamonds, as they fell in drops of crystal clearness to the floor.

"The girls are in Cousin Ruth's room at work," Jack answered. "Olive and Frieda have promised not to look at the tree until the evening. We are going to have everything in pure white, a regular German Christmas tree, in honor of Frieda's birthday and her name. There is a white world inside and out and we shall be at peace for to-night at least," Jack ended with a little sigh.

Jim moved nearer to the tree and shook one of the branches until the bits of frost fell to the ground with a soft tinkle like the far-off music of sleigh bells. He kept his clouded blue eyes turned away from Jack's.

Jack slipped her arm through his and pressed it affectionately.

"Never you mind, Jim, I didn't mean to be doleful," Jack persisted. "I'm not a bit, really. Olive is all right, and you've seen that that wretched Josef and old Laska have been sent away, so they can't annoy her any more. And I think it's perfectly great that we are going to have such a lovely Christmas to-night as we have hardly ever had before! Suppose it is our last one at the Lodge, we will have it to remember! But, Mr. Colter," Jack danced away from Jim and made him a mock curtsy, "you may kindly observe that I haven't begun to pack up the furniture at the Lodge just yet. We never say die, do we, Jim? I think I will have that motto engraved on a coat of arms for Rainbow Ranch."

Jim nodded approvingly. "It's a pretty good sentiment, Jack," he agreed, as he started toward the door. "I must be off now,

but I'll be back to-night, promptly at seven, for the festivities."

But Jack clung to him. "See here, Jim, you can't go so soon. You haven't said hello to Cousin Ruth or showed her the tree. You know you want to see her. She has had a bad cold ever since the night we found Olive and it is only polite that you should tell her you are glad she is well." Jack's tones were perfectly serious and her expression as innocent as a baby's.

Jim flushed a little angrily. "No. I don't want to see her, at least not particularly. Why should I?" Jim demanded awkwardly. "That is,—"

Ruth was standing at the living-room door with her arms full of mysterious packages. She laughed and came into the room, glad that Jim looked as awkward as she felt on the day of her first horseback ride with him.

When Ruth was putting down her packages Jack winked solemnly at Jim, and in return for his irritated glance at her, she slipped quietly out of the room.

All the way down the hall Jack was smiling to herself. "Wouldn't it be too funny if old Jim should fall in love with Cousin Ruth?"

she thought. "Goodness knows why he is so touchy about her! She has been awfully nice to him, since he taught her to ride horseback, but the friendlier she is, the queerer he behaves.

'Oh, young Lochinvar has come out of the west,
Of all the wide world, his steed is the best,'"

Jack quoted, apropos of nothing, as she joined the other girls in Ruth's bedroom.

Olive, Jean and Frieda were working industriously. Over in the corner there was a little mound that looked like a pile of snow but was only the strings of popcorn for the Christmas tree. Jean was fashioning an immense silver star. Olive and Frieda were filling boxes of white paper, decorated with the initials, "R. G.," with homemade taffy candy and chocolate fudge. The ranch girls had not invited their neighbors to their Christmas eve party, but the cowboys who worked on their ranch were coming up to the Lodge to wish them good luck.

Jack dropped down on the floor and deliberately began devouring the fudge from a big China dish. "Don't work too hard, Olive," Jack insisted, reaching up to pop a piece of

candy into Olive's mouth. "Remember you are not very strong yet."

Olive only laughed. She was a little paler than when she first came to the ranch in the early autumn, but her eyes were serene and untroubled and she looked far less timid and shy. Since finding her mother's picture in the possession of old Laska, Olive felt that she was more like the other girls and the thought that old Laska had any real claim on her, no longer worried her.

"This isn't very hard work, Jack," Olive replied gaily. "And there is still a lot for us to do to be ready for to-night. Just think, this will be the first real Christmas tree I have ever seen!"

"Well, we won't have so much work to do, Olive, if Jack eats all the candy," Jean remarked severely. "And Jack, perhaps if you would help Frieda and Olive, instead of talking so much, they wouldn't have such a lot to do."

Jack flung a cotton snowball at Jean. "Bear with me, sweet coz," she pleaded cheerfully. "I don't know just why, girls, but I feel so kind of happy to-day, that I suppose I am silly. I believe all the clouds have

passed over our benighted heads and the Rainbow Arch of Promise is just over the Lodge."

Jean pointed scornfully to the winter landscape outside the window.

"It looks rather like we might have a rainbow after the summer shower: don't you think so, Olive?" she inquired. But she bent over and crowned Jack with a wreath of silver tinsel and went on with her work, smiling as though she had more faith in Jack's prediction than she cared to confess.

"Ah, Jean," Jack went on, "don't you know there is a legend that somewhere there is a wonderful land where all the rainbows that have ever been or ever will be, drift to and fro, like beautiful colored flowers? Perhaps one of these rainbows will find us to-night in spite of the weather." Jack's face softened at her own pretty fancy.

All day the girls worked and whispered and laughed. Ruth and Jean and Jack decorated the great Christmas tree. The gifts were piled up under the tree, for nothing was to be allowed to mar the perfect whiteness of its decorations. Only Ruth's presents were to be given just before supper time. She in-

sisted that this was absolutely necessary, or else they would lose half their value.

When Jack came into her room at about five o'clock to get ready for the evening, she saw what Ruth had meant. Lying on the foot of her bed was the prettiest dress Jack had ever owned in her life. It was very simple, of a soft white material like crêpe, with a lovely band of silver embroidery about the low, square neck and around the waist and skirt. Jean was busy in the kitchen. But Jack saw that her dress was of delicate, pink cashmere, the color Jean most loved.

Jack slipped into her costume very quickly and stole softly into the great closed living-room, thinking she would find Ruth there. She had no idea how beautiful she looked.

The room was empty. The pine tree stood in one corner, lifting its noble green branches hung in dim festoons and covered with myriads of small white candles. It was quite dark. Only the fire, that never went out all winter long at the Lodge, flickered and danced and threw fantastic shadows over the girl who was standing near the Christmas tree.

Jack's eyes were misty as she gazed about her. Her loves were not so very many, but

they were deep and strong. She cared for the old ranch house more than most girls would for a fairy palace.

Suddenly Jack heard a stamping on the porch just outside the front door and Shep's quick bark. She ran swiftly to open it. She supposed Jim had come up to the house earlier than he had promised. But it was dark and the glare of the snow for a moment blinded her.

Frank Kent held out his hand. "May I come in, Miss Ralston?" he asked. "I know it's late, but I have tramped all the way over here and it's taken a long time. I want to tell you something and I want to say good-bye."

Jack hurried Frank in near the fire. He had been to the Lodge once since Olive was found, but the girls had not seen or heard of him in several days.

Jack lit the candles on the mantelpiece and then turned to smile at her guest. Frank stared at her boyishly and then: "Gee, Miss Ralston," he exclaimed. "If you don't mind my saying it, you look perfectly ripping!"

But Jack was regarding Frank anxiously. He had a deep and rather unbecoming bruise

over one eye and the other side of his face was somewhat swollen.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Frank, Mr. Kent, I mean?" Jack demanded. "You look like you had been in a fight." And Jack laughed at the thought of so well-bred a fellow as Frank Kent engaging in such a small-boy occupation.

"I have. That is what I came over to tell you about." Frank replied. "That is, I didn't come to tell you about the fight, but of something that led to it. I shall not go back to the Norton ranch again. I am through with those people forever." Frank dropped into a chair which Jack drew forward. "You see, Miss Ralston, it's like this. I have been knowing for some time that Dan Norton, Jr., was a cad, and I have had a good many scores to settle with him. But I didn't know that he and his father were thieves until to-day. I happened to be in the room next Mr. Norton's study, when I heard Dan and the old man talking about your ranch. I don't say I actually hurried away, but I wasn't going to eavesdrop. Just as I started to clear out, however, I overheard Mr. Norton say: 'Well, we've fixed them good and plenty,

haven't we, Dan, Jr. Rainbow Ranch is the same as ours! I tell you might is right in this country, my lad.' I kind of stopped then, Miss Jack," Frank added. "I didn't exactly like the sound of what Mr. Norton said."

Jack had come close to Frank, but her hands were clasped behind her to hide her impatience. "Do go on, please," she urged breathlessly.

"Then Dan answered: 'You are sure right, Father. We are going to prove that Rainbow Ranch belongs to us a whole lot easier than if it really did.' I heard just exactly those words, Miss Ralston," Frank remarked, quietly. "And I am ready to swear to them in any court of law."

"Oh-h," Jack bit her lips to hide their trembling and a hot color flooded her face. "What did you hear next?" she pleaded. "Do go on."

"I didn't hear anything more," Frank answered. "I marched into their study and told Mr. Norton and Dan exactly what I thought of them. Then Dan and I got to using some language and we rather broke up the furniture for a while. Of course I can't stay in the house of a man whom I

know to be a rogue. But will you tell your overseer, Mr. Colter, that I won't get too far out of this neighborhood to appear when your suit about the ownership of Rainbow Ranch comes into court." Frank looked around for his hat. "I hope you will have a very happy Christmas," he said. He held himself so erect, with a dignity of grace and breeding such as Jack had rarely seen. Before Jack realized what was happening, Frank was out of the room.

For the second time in their acquaintance, she ran after him. This time she put her hand on his and fairly dragged him back with her.

"Oh, please, please don't go. You must stay and have Christmas at the Lodge with us," Jack entreated. "We have plenty of room and we would so love to have you. Do wait here until I go and find Cousin Ruth, I know she will be more apt to persuade you to stay."

Needless to say, Cousin Ruth was successful and at eight o'clock, the ranch girls, Cousin Ruth, Frank Kent, Jim Colter, Aunt Ellen, Uncle Zack, and six bashful cowboys were gathered about the mammoth Christmas tree.

Frieda was to light the candles. She looked like a plump little German fairy in her new white frock, with her long braids of flaxen hair.

But Frieda could not reach up to the tall candles on the big tree and she would not allow either Jim or Frank to lift her up.

On the largest chair in the room, Frieda could tiptoe up to almost the tallest row of candles. But just under a little wax figure of the Virgin and the Christ Child, Jean had set seven in a circle. These were the top-most glory of the tree and Frieda's crowning ambition and were the only candles she could not possibly reach from her chair.

The little Christmas-eve girl slipped onto the floor, and before any of the men in the room guessed what she was after, dragged out from the book shelves an immense old law book, bound in worn brown leather. Frieda started gallantly across the room with it. But it dropped from her small hands and scattered yellow parchment leaves over the floor. The back of the book ripped off and Frieda held only the leather cover. Out of this, from a kind of inner pocket, a folded sheet of paper fluttered and fell at Frieda's feet.

The company crowded to the rescue. Blonde heads and brown heads bumped into each other in picking up the leaves. Frieda started to the fire with the old book cover and the folded paper. She gave them both a toss toward the flames, but the paper fluttered back to her feet.

Frieda laughed and picked it up again. "This paper won't be burned up, Jack," she exclaimed. "Let's light it in the Christmas candles."

Jack caught Frieda's hand. "May I look at it, dear?" she asked gently.

Frieda consented to have Frank lift her to the row of lights on top of their Christmas tree. Jim was talking to Cousin Ruth, Jean was distributing boxes of candy, and it was Olive who put her arm around Jack.

"What is it, dear? What has happened?" she whispered. "Are you glad or sorry over something?" It was no wonder Olive asked. Jack's eyes were streaming in tears, but under them shone a kind of radiance. Her face was white one minute and then glowed with a beautiful rose color.

"Oh, I am so happy, happy, Olive!" she cried, throwing her arms around Olive and

forgetting the rest of the company. "See, we have the most wonderful Christmas gift. Frieda has found our deed to Rainbow Ranch! I believe somehow that Father sent it to us to-night."

But Jim and Cousin Ruth and everybody in the room had heard Jack.

Jim lifted Jack up in the chair, which Frieda had given up. She waved her wonderful paper before her friends. The cowboys broke into a prolonged cheer. The girls cried a little, because they couldn't help it. Jim suddenly looked ten years younger and what he whispered to Cousin Ruth, no one ever knew, but she blushed and shook her head.

"Do let's dance or do something, quick!" Jean exclaimed, "or I simply can't bear it." She ran over to the piano. But at this moment sleigh bells sounded outside and a pair of horses could be heard stamping on the frozen ground. Then another sleigh followed and the wide hall of Rainbow Lodge was quickly crowded with Mr. and Mrs. Simpson, Harry Pryor, Laura, who for once looked friendly, and all the neighbors of the ranch girls for miles around.

"Villagers all, this frosty tide,
Let your doors swing open wide,
Though wind may follow and snow beside,
Yet draw us in by your fire to bide."

Harry Pryor sang the first verse of the old Christmas carol alone. Before he had finished Jean was playing the air softly on the piano and all the guests joined in the second verse.

"Here we stand in the snow and the sleet,
Blowing fingers and stamping feet,
Come from far away, you to greet,
You by the fire and we in the street,
Bidding you joy in the morning."

"How did you know, Aunt Sallie? How could you have come to congratulate us at just the right moment?" Jack inquired with a puzzled frown, as she helped Mrs. Simpson out of her wraps. "We only found it about a minute before."

"Found what?" Mrs. Simpson demanded curiously. But the next instant she put her comfortable arms about Jack and hugged her with all her might.

"Of course we didn't know you had found your deed to Rainbow Ranch, child," Aunt Sallie exclaimed. "We came over because

we were afraid you might not be happy this Christmas. We wanted you to know that we all meant to stand by you. I don't think there is anything in this State that we have a better right to be proud of than our ranch girls," and Aunt Sallie choked a little with mixed emotions.

Jack laughed gaily. "You are a dear, Aunt Sallie," she answered gratefully. "I don't know why you should be proud of us. But anyhow, it is lots of fun to be a Ranch Girl."

The Ranch Girls Series.

The story of the four Ranch Girls is plainly just beginning. Girls so entirely unlike in temperament and ideals, as Jack, Jean, Olive and Frieda, cannot fail to lead lives that will develop in interest. In the second volume in the Ranch Girls Series, which will be entitled, "The Ranch Girls' Pot of Gold," they have even more unusual experiences and adventures and are brought into closer contact with the real life of the West. It isn't possible to tell exactly what the Ranch Girls will do in this second book, but it is safe to promise that it will be something even more original and full of delightful opportunity, than running a ranch.

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